The Pioneer Twins

Lucy Fitch Perkins

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THE PIONEER TWINS

By Lucy Fitch Perkins

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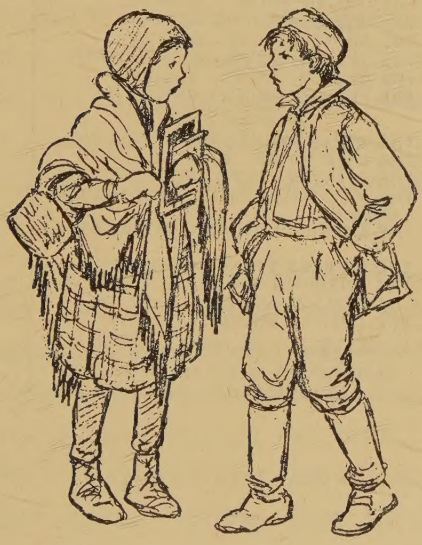

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FOREWORD

In an elm-shaded street in a near-by town there stands a pleasant house. In that house there is a library, and in that library, hidden away in a safe place, there is a little worn book covered with faded brown leather. It is the pocket diary of a brave man who crossed the Great Plains with an ox-team in the early days of the California gold rush. Its pages are yellow with age, the ink is pale, and the writing is so fine that one almost needs a magnifying-glass to read it. Here in as few words as possible are recorded some of the episodes and adventures of this terrible journey. There is also a list of the provisions and equipment that he took with him, and accounts showing what he paid for having his oxen shod, and for being ferried over rivers in steam-boats or in Indian canoes. In one short paragraph he tells of an Indian massacre, in another, of the drowning of members of his company when fording a river, and in still another he inscribes the names of those who died of hardship and exposure on the trail.

This precious record was placed in my hands by

the grandson of the man who wrote it, and its pages suggested much of the material woven into this story of pioneer days.

The route followed by the Twins is the same that is traced so carefully in this diary, and many of the incidents and events of their journey are authenticated by some note or statement in the record. Such adventures were the common experience of the army of men, women, and children that crossed the great American Desert in the days — less than eighty years ago — when there were few steam-boats and fewer steam-trains in the whole world, and when travel, as we know it now, was not yet even prophesied.

These sturdy pioneers made a pathway across the continent for all future generations to follow, and over the route that cost them six months of suffering and danger we now pass in three days of luxurious idleness.

More precious than the wonderful development of our country that they made possible, is the heritage of courage and fortitude that they left to those whose duty and privilege it is to carry on their constructive spirit in our own day, and to triumph, as they did, in works of peace.

L. F. P.

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I

THE LOG HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE

I

THE LOG HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE

SCHOOL was over for the day, and a crowd of eager, laughing boys and girls poured out of the little red school-house standing beside a muddy Illinois road and scattered in different directions toward their homes. Two children, a brother and a sister, came last out of the door and hurried forward to join a little freckled-faced, tow-headed lad of about their own age who had already reached the corner.

"Wait for us Billy; we're coming!" called the girl.

"Can't," answered the freckled one, briefly; "got to go to the store for Maw; you come along with me!"

"Can't," returned the girl; "Aunt Maria told us we had to come straight home from school, and she's awful set!"

"Good-bye, then," said Billy, and he trotted off whistling.

Left to themselves, the boy and girl turned in the opposite direction and trudged slowly along in silence until they came within sight of the log farm-house standing back in an open field at some dis-

tance from the road which was their home.

Here their steps lagged. The boy stopped now and again to break with the heel of his stout boots the thin crust of ice forming over the puddles in the road, and his sister stood still, from time to time, to stare toward the house as if looking for something that she missed. From its red chimney a thin thread of smoke curled toward the sky. The girl pointed to it.

"Look there, Jim," she said; "the smoke's rising. Maybe it'll clear by to-morrow. There's a yellow streak in the sky, too."

"Yup," said the boy, lifting his eyes to follow her pointing finger. "Maybe so."

He returned to the puddles, and had brought his heel down upon another thin sheet of ice with a satisfying crash, when his sister again called to him.

"And look there by the gate, Jimmy," she said. "There's a horse and wagon. Sure as you live, Aunt Maria's got company!"

"She can have her company to herself for all of me," growled the boy, kicking a frozen clod of mud across the road into the ditch. "I shan't go in!"

"No more shall I," said the girl. Then she burst out passionately, "I never want to go in any more now that Father and Mother aren't there and Aunt Maria is!"

She tried to check a rising sob and wiped her eyes energetically with her rough mitten. The boy looked at her in helpless distress.

"Oh, come now, Josie," he begged. "Don't you cry or you'll start me bawling, too! Don't you mind how Father used to say, 'It'll be all the same a hundred years from now'?"

"What good is a hundred years from now to us?" sobbed the girl. "We're here now! I can't get used to *her* not being at the window when we come home from school!"

"It isn't a mite of use to cry about it, any-

way," said the boy. "Crying won't bring Father back from California or Mother back from heaven, either one."

"Maybe Mother wouldn't want to come back if she could," said the girl. "Heaven must be a lot nicer than this place from what the preacher said at the funeral. Wings, and golden streets, and everything! I just wish I had wings! I know what I'd do with them."

The boy made no reply, and, after a mo-

ment's pause, the girl's grief burst forth afresh.

"If only we could get rid of Aunt Maria, it wouldn't be so hard," she said bitterly. "If it could only just be you and me and Ben and Ginger!"

The boy jammed his fists deeper into his pockets, hunched his shoulders, and cast a black look at the house before he exploded into speech.

"Aunt Maria!" he snorted. "I like her just about worse than the measles and the mumps both together. She's a — she's a — regular —" he got so far in an effort to express the degree of his dislike but inspiration failed him. "Well, anyway, I don't like her," he finished weakly. "She never lets you do what you want to do, and she all the time pesters you to do the things you'd rather be licked than have to do anytime."

"I don't like her any better than you do," agreed the girl, "even if she is Mother's sister."

"She's only just a half-sister, anyway," urged Jimmy, "and it's the wrong half." They had now reached the cart-path that led from the road back to the farm buildings. "I tell you what, Sis," said the boy, "let's turn in here and go into the barn, so Aunt Maria can't see us from the window. Maybe Ben's home, and if he is, he'll be out there too. He likes her just about worse than we do."

Suddenly he stooped and clapped his hands together. "Come on, Ginger, old boy," he called; and a large yellow dog came bounding out of the open door of the barn and rushed toward them, barking a glad welcome. He jumped up and planted his muddy paws on their shoulders and tried to lick their faces, then ran round and round in frantic circles to express his joy.

"Good old Ginger! Hist, now!" said the boy, lifting his finger warningly. "Where's Ben?" Instantly the dog stood still and whined a little questioning whine. "Go find Ben," said the boy again, and off went the

dog like a shot. He dashed in among a few hens that were scratching about in the hay strewn over the barn floor and sent them squawking out the door. He leaped up and put his paws on the front of the stall where the cow was placidly chewing her cud and made her jump. He ran to the corn-bin, stirring up the pig on the way, and when the children reached the door, he was there to greet them and say almost as plainly as words could do, "No brother Ben here! I've looked everywhere."

"Ben isn't here," said the boy. "No use looking for him. Ginger knows! Come on, Sis. Let's slip round into the dog-trot. There's a chink in the logs, and we can peek in and see who's with Aunt Maria, and maybe I can scare up a piece of corn-pone or something if she's not looking. I'm as hungry as a weasel after chickens, and sometimes she sets things away in the big room."

"I'm hungry, too," agreed the girl, and the two children at once ran out the door,

crept round behind the barn, and started cautiously toward the house. Ginger followed them with his tail wagging so hard that the whole back half of him wagged too.

The two rooms of the log farm-house were connected by an open passage-way called the "dog-trot." There were no windows in the walls of this passage, but on one side a door opened into the kitchen, where the family really lived. On the other side another door led into a large bare room where all sorts of things were stored and where Aunt Maria in her less cautious moments sometimes set food away. The children tiptoed quietly into this runway and, standing side by side, peeped through a crack where the clay which was used to fill the chinks between the logs had fallen out. Though the slit was narrow, it was long enough to give them both a good view of the kitchen.

Fortunately Aunt Maria's back was turned at the moment, for she was bending over the fireplace to lift the tea-pot from

the hearth, where it had been set to keep hot. On the farther side of the fireplace sat her visitor, and the children recognized the placid face of Mrs. Sanders, Billy's mother and their own best friend, who lived on a farm half a mile away across the fields. The leaping flames of the log fire lit the room

with a comfortable glow, and showed two fat beds covered with gay patchwork quilts in the dim corners, and underneath one of them the trundle-bed where the children could still remember having slept. It danced over the few plates on the dresser and sparkled in the cups on the table which stood between Aunt Maria and her guest.

"Have another cup, do, Mrs. Sanders," Aunt Maria was saying. "It'll chirk you up for whatever's before you. That's what I say to Reynolds" (Aunt Maria always referred to her husband as Reynolds), "and goodness knows I need something stiffening before those young ones get home from school, every day!" She filled her visitor's cup and her own, sighed heavily, and, sitting down in her chair, gave herself up to the enjoyment of tea and her troubles.

"I never was one to talk," she went on. "As I observe to Reynolds, it's always my way to suffer in silence, but I must say those young ones surely do need chastening. The big boy isn't so cantankerous, but the

twins!"—she shook her head solemnly. "They're always up to something; and if you ask me" (Mrs. Sanders hadn't asked her, but Aunt Maria obliged just the same) —"if you ask me which one is worse than the other, I'd nominate the girl! She might just as well be a boy and done with it! But laws, Mrs. Sanders! what can you expect? Their mother all the time humored them and gave them their own way. She spared the rod and spoiled the child, just the same as Scripture says. She hadn't the spirit of a rabbit herself, for when her husband got the gold fever and lit out for the diggings, she just peaked and pined until she up and died."

This could have been no news to Mrs. Sanders, for she had been their kindest neighbor during the hard days that had passed before their mother's death. The children had not meant to eavesdrop, but now they forgot everything, even their hunger, in their eagerness to hear Mrs. Sanders's reply. They listened in vain. Mrs.

Sanders's eyes snapped, but she sipped her tea and said nothing.

Aunt Maria seemed not to notice her silence.

"Well, the Lord's will be done!" she went on piously; "and, as I said to Reynolds, this affliction may work to their good, for you mark my words they're going to learn a thing or two if I'm spared to them!" It was as well for Aunt Maria's peace of mind that she did not see two pairs of blue eyes at that moment glaring at her through the crack.

"She won't teach me anything, I bet! I'm dumb, I am," whispered Jimmy.

Jo stepped on his toes and frowned.

"Keep still!" she breathed, for Aunt Maria evidently had more on her mind and was bent on getting it off.

"I calculate the older boy can hire out as a farm hand, but it's my cross to have the young ones saddled onto me," she complained.

Mrs. Sanders stirred uneasily and opened

her mouth as if about to speak, but Aunt Maria firmly held the floor, and continued to suffer with her accustomed silence.

"It's no more than right that they should bring along with them whatever's left here. It's little enough at best, but 'twill help some toward their keep. There's a good cow, and a parcel of chickens, besides the oxen and horses and the pig. It's better than nothing."

"I should say it was!" murmured Mrs. Sanders, and then shut her lips tight, as if she were holding in a whole swarm of angry words. Aunt Maria set down her cup.

"I calculate they can be made to do quite a bit of work, too, if they have a firm hand over them," she said complacently, "but their mother brought 'em up to think they were born to be waited on. They'll get their eyes open before I'm through with them." (Here Jimmy ran out his tongue and nearly bit it off by accident when he snapped his mouth shut again.)

Mrs. Sanders now managed to get in a word. "Seems kind of harsh to separate them from Ben," she said. "He's all they've got left unless their paw comes home, and that's not likely for quite a spell yet. Ben's a good brother, and he has a level head on him if he is only seventeen."

"The more reason why he's got to shift for himself," declared Aunt Maria grimly, "and if the children don't like it, they'll just have to lump it. Beggars can't be choosers."

"But they're not beggars," protested Mrs. Sanders, looking ready to burst. "Like as not their paw will turn up a heap o' gold out there in California. Why, my man says that out there—" she got no further.

"Humph!" snorted Aunt Maria "He hasn't sent any money home yet. They haven't heard from him but once since he got to those God-forsaken parts."

"I reckon it isn't so easy sending money back," urged Mrs. Sanders. "Nor yet let-

ters. The man hasn't been prospecting long! It took five months to get there, and he's been gone less than a year all told. Give him time! He was always a faithful provider, but I reckon he can't work miracles any more than some of the rest of us."

Aunt Maria ignored this thrust. "He was always taking a new notion," she returned. "Roving, that's what he is! I shouldn't be surprised if he never came back. There's plenty that don't."

"There might be more than one way of accounting for it if he never did," argued Mrs. Sanders. "They say it's a mighty rough life out there, and men are no more fit to look after themselves than so many children, anyway. You know that."

"All the more reason those young ones shouldn't be building up false hopes, then," declared Aunt Maria sternly. "They'll rare round some when the split with Ben comes, and there'll be terrible goings-on when it comes to parting with that good-for-nothing dog, but it isn't nature for them to keep on

mourning forever. They've got to take things the way they find them in this world, same as the rest of us, and get used to it." She rose stiffly from her seat. "They ought to be home by now," she said, glancing toward the window. "Most likely they've been kept after school for not getting their lessons."

Mrs. Sanders rose too.

"I must be going home to start supper. It'll soon be dark as a pocket, and Billy will be coming home hungry as a wolf," she said, and the two women moved toward the door.

Terrified lest they be caught, the children leaped down the steps to the ground and fled like frightened rabbits to the barn. Once safely within its shelter, they flung themselves down on a heap of hay in an empty stall and cried. Ginger, hearing these sounds of woe, came bounding toward them with little sympathetic whines and, lying down beside them, tried to lick away their tears. The boy put his arms about the dog's neck.

"She shan't take you away, Ginger! I won't let her!" he cried, and Ginger, lifting his nose, expressed his feelings in a long-drawn-out howl. They were a little comforted by the dog's sympathy, and the sobs gradually died away. For a time there was nothing to ruffle the silence of the barn but the quiet breathing of the cattle, the soft whispering noises in the hayloft, and the creaking of floor boards with sounds like stealthy footsteps.

Suddenly Ginger gave a short bark, and, scrambling to his feet, ran to the open door.

"He hears something. Maybe it's Ben," whispered Jo.

Both children sat up in the hay and listened, and soon they too heard the thud of horse's hoofs pounding along the muddy road.

"It *is* Ben! Ginger always knows!" cried Jim, and, jumping up, both children followed the dog. In a moment more Ben himself came riding through the open door.

"Hello," he said, when he saw Jim and Jo. "What are you doing out here?"

Not waiting for an answer, he swung himself off the horse's back and stooped to unbuckle the saddle-girths. In doing so he got a nearer view in the dim light of two woe-begone faces.

"What in the dickens is the matter?" he asked, pausing in the act of hanging the saddle on its wooden peg near the door. "Your faces are as long as a month of Sundays!"

"Oh, Ben," burst out Jo, "it's something awful! Aunt Maria told Mrs. Sanders she's going to separate us. She's going to take the horses and the oxen and the cow and the pig and the chickens and Jim and me, and she says you've got to hire out as a farm-hand!"

"And she won't let us have Ginger, either," added Jim.

For an instant Ben stood still. His jaw dropped. Then he shut his mouth with a snap, hung up the saddle, took off the

horse's bridle, gave her a gentle slap on the flank, to send her to her stall, and put on her halter. When this was all done, he said: "Well, I'll be everlastingly jiggered! How did you find it out? Did Mrs. Sanders tell you?"

"No, we peeked through a chink in the wall and heard her say it," cried Jim. "She hasn't seen us. She doesn't know we're home from school."

"Hum," said Ben, "listeners never hear any good of themselves."

He thrust his hands deep down in his pockets and stood still thinking.

"Now, you listen to me, Bub and Sis," he said at last. "Don't you let on that you know anything about this, and don't go moping around like chickens with the pip, either! She isn't going to do any such thing! Now, start your boots, both of you, and throw down some hay for the cattle while I go to the house for a lantern. I'll tell her we're out doing the chores, and that we'll all be late for supper. That'll make

her mad, but she'll have time to get over some of it before we go in."

"But, Ben," cried Jo, "she said —"

"I don't care a hang what she said," was Ben's answer as he started for the house. "Get to work, both of you! I'll race you, and if you're spry, I'll show you something nice when I get the milking done."

Fired by this promise, the children rushed to their tasks. Jim stumbled up the ladder to the loft in the dark and filled the mangers with hay, while Jo bedded the stalls with straw in record time, and when Ben rose from the milking-stool, they were both at his elbow on tiptoe with impatience.

"Hurry, Ben, hurry," begged Jo, "I just can't wait another minute."

Ben was already rummaging in his pockets, and now he brought out a folded paper with a postmark on it and held it up for them to see.

"Look at that," he said. "I stopped at the post-office when I came back from the blacksmith's. It's from Father."

He gave the lantern to Jim, unfolded the precious paper, and began to read.

"Bouncing Bet Diggings"
"on the American River
"Near Sutter's Mill, California
"October 1, 1849

"Dear Wife and Children." So far he read, then interrupted himself to say, "Of course Father doesn't know about Mother yet, and won't for a long time. This was written five months ago and only just got here."

"California seems almost farther off than heaven," murmured Jo; and Ben said: "Like as not it is. I shouldn't wonder." And Jim said, "Oh, *go on!* What does *he say?*"

"Dear Wife and Children," Ben began again. "These few lines leave me quite well, and I hope they find you the same. I am now prospecting near Sutter's Mill, where the first gold was found, but I haven't struck pay dirt yet. I have a chance

to send this letter by a man who has made his pile and is going back to the States to get his folks and bring them out here. I don't know when I can come back for you, if ever, but some day, when Ben gets a little older, maybe he can fill my place, and you'll all come out to join me here, only I want to send you money so you can come down the Mississippi and around to San Francisco by boat. It's a great and wonderful country out here, but it's a terrible chore to get to it. It's a long trip and full of all kinds of dangers, but more people are taking it every day. It's a wonder where all the men come from. Seems like all the men in creation were just pouring in here, for all the world like flies around a keg of molasses.

"Women are mighty scarce, though, and children more so. It makes a man sense the blessings he just took for granted. I tell you, Mother, I dream at nights sometimes of your apple-pies and fried cakes. Other things too. I can't say I'm partial to my own cooking, but I get enough to eat and

have no cause to complain. My tools cost a right smart, and the dust hasn't been panning out as I hoped, so I can't send any money back yet, but I'm hoping to strike it rich almost any day now, and I reckon Peters will agree to take the farm again on shares, same as this year, and that will give you a living until I make my lucky strike and can send for you, and here's hoping it will be soon.

"Your loving father and husband,

"HIRAM MILLER"

"That's all," said Ben, and don't either one of you let on to Aunt Maria that we got a letter."

"You bet your boots we won't," said Jim with conviction. "She said Father had a roving disposition, and like as not would never come back at all!"

"She did, did she?" said Ben. "Well, maybe he won't, but Aunt Maria's got a few surprises coming to her of one kind and another, or I miss my reckoning."

"Children!" called a strident voice, and from the outer darkness came the sound of footsteps. "For the land's sake, where are you keeping yourselves? Supper's been ready this half-hour!"

"Hush! She's coming," gasped Jo, leaping to her feet and nearly falling over Ginger in the dark.

Ben thrust the letter into his pocket. "Coming, Aunt Maria," he called, and, seizing the milk-pail, he led the way to the door. Jim came after him bearing the lantern, which threw strange, weird shadows of their three pairs of legs over the wide landscape as they followed Aunt Maria into the house.

The evening meal was eaten by the light of a single candle, while Aunt Maria moved about the kitchen in grim silence. She had already eaten her supper, and was busy packing the few clothes she had brought with her when she had come a fortnight before to attend her sister's funeral and to do what she thought to be her duty by her

nephews and niece. In her talk with Mrs. Sanders she had fully persuaded herself that she was an injured and aggrieved woman, and now she watched the children resentfully as they ate their supper, angry because they were late, and angrier still because they seemed cheerful and paid no heed to her reproachful silence. At last she could keep still no longer, and, standing in front of the table with her hands on her hips, she freed her mind.

"I suppose you young ones will be glad to know I am going home in the morning," she said bitterly.

This news was received without a word, but Jo gave Jim a joyful kick under the table, and Jim choked over his potatoes and upset the salt as a consequence and had to be thumped on the back by Ben. Aunt Maria stood still until quiet was again restored. Then she went on with her remarks.

"I'm leaving some things cooked up for you, and if you aren't too lazy to feed yourselves, you can get along easy enough

while they last, but after that you'll have to buckle to and do something for yourselves or go hungry! When I'm gone you can't play all the way home from school and find a good supper ready for you when you get here!" (Here Jim kicked Jo.) "It'll teach you a few things to get along by yourselves till the term ends. Then I'm coming back to settle things up here. Ben, to-morrow's a Saturday, and you can drive me over to the four corners, and I'll take the stage back to Quincy, and your Uncle Reynolds will meet me there. I can't neglect my own work any longer to wait on you."

This, too, brought no answer. The children sat bent over their plates, and fed themselves diligently.

"What time do you want to go?" Ben asked at last.

"The sooner the better," snapped Aunt Maria. "Staying is no treat to me, I can tell you."

"I'll have the horse ready any time you say," answered Ben.

"Seven o'clock in the morning, then," said she, thumping her carpet-bag down beside the door. "And now, Josephine and James, you can just get up and wash the dishes by yourselves."

The children obeyed without a word, and while the work in the house was being done, Ben went out to shut Ginger in the barn and make sure that the cattle were all right for the night. He was gone for some time. When he returned, he found Aunt Maria snoring under the patchwork quilts of one bed, with Jo wide awake beside her, while in the other corner Jim was already sound asleep. When she heard him come in, Jo rose up cautiously on one elbow and, looking down on Aunt Maria's nose, made a motion as if she were going to give it a tweak to stop the fearful sounds that were issuing from it.

Ben chuckled in spite of himself. He shook his fist at her warningly, then tiptoed to the fireplace, covered the coals with ashes to keep them alive till morning, and blew

out the candle. A moment later he crawled in beside Jim under the patchwork quilt at the other end of the room, and soon every one in the little log house was asleep.

II

A SECRET

II

A SECRET

THEY were all up early the next morning, and the chores were finished and breakfast eaten before Ben came to the door at seven o'clock with Selim hitched to the big farm-wagon, ready to take Aunt Maria on the first lap of her homeward way. Jim and Jo stood at the window, watching her angular figure wrapped in its black shawl until Selim and the wagon were mere specks in the distance; then they turned round to face the disordered room. It was a forlorn moment, in spite of their relief in seeing Aunt Maria go. There was even one instant of weakness when Jim might almost have admitted that she had her points. They were only twelve years old, and the housework loomed large in their minds. Jim took a swift glance at the unmade beds, the untidy hearth, and the unwashed dishes, and, seiz-

ing his cap, was about to slip quietly away to the barn, but Jo's eye was upon him. She seized him firmly by the collar. "Jim Miller, where do you think you're going?" she demanded.

"I—I—was just going to let out the hens and see if the barn door was shut," said Jimmy, trying to look more innocent than he felt.

"Not by a jugful," returned Jo, with spirit. "You've got to stay and help me do all this work."

"But the barn door ought to be shut! It's a cold morning! Besides, the eggs have to be gathered—we didn't do it yesterday," urged Jim.

For answer, Jo seized his cap and threw it on top of one of the rafters and a lively scrimmage began at once.

"Anyhow," said Jimmy, a few moments later from under the bed where he had taken refuge,—"anyhow, dishes and such as that are girl's work, not man's work."

"Maybe not, no more are you a man,"

answered Jo, prodding him with the broom. "Come out of that! It's all got to be done, and you're not mean, Jimmy, you know you aren't."

"Well, anyway, I'm not a girl—thank the Lord for that," said Jimmy sulkily.

"So you aren't," agreed Jo; "you act more like a baby."

Jimmy emerged, grinning sheepishly, and soon the two were busily at work, setting the room to rights. They washed the dishes, and made the beds, and swept the floor, and, when everything was in order again, they heard Ben's step in the dog-trot, and Jo flew to open the door. He came in unwinding a tippet from his neck, and looked approvingly about the tidy room.

"All cleaned up," he said. "Good for you, Jo!"

"Jimmy helped," said Jo loyally.

"You bet your boots I helped," agreed Jim. "Jo has the makings of another Aunt Maria in her."

Jo reached for the broom and Jim dived under the bed again.

"Quit your fooling and come out of that," said Ben sternly. "I want to talk to you. You needn't suppose we're out of the woods just because Aunt Maria's gone."

He drew his father's chair to the hearth

and sat down before the fire. Ginger came and sat gravely beside him, and the Twins perched together on a settle and swung their feet.

"Now, you listen to me," said Ben. "We're not going with Aunt Maria, that's as true as preaching, but the question is what are we going to do? If we stay on here by ourselves, she'll come back and try to run things; that's as true as preaching, too. Maybe more so. We can wiggle along somehow till the school term ends, then we've just got to go ahead by ourselves."

"Go ahead where?" asked Jimmy.

"That's just the point," answered Ben. "Now, I've got a plan, and if you two can keep your mouths shut, I'll tell it to you. And, mind this, if you leak, the jig's up—for there isn't a soul you could tell it to that wouldn't call us plumb crazy and say we ought to be shut up. Maybe they'd try to do it, and then there'd be nothing for it but for you two to go and live with Aunt Maria."

"Oh, Ben!" shuddered Jo. "We won't tell a single soul, cross our hearts, hope to die, we won't!"

"Go ahead, Ben," said Jimmy, striking a noble attitude, "I'm your man. You can count on me!"

"You bet your life I can," Ben answered crushingly. "That's just the trouble; I can count on you to leak like a sieve!" This was an unfeeling thrust at Jimmy's loquacious past.

"Aw, Ben, you try me this once," he begged, somewhat crestfallen. "I'm a lot older now!"

"Older than what?" asked Ben quizzically.

"Older than I was," said Jim.

"Well, then," said Ben, "if you think you can be trusted, listen to what I'm telling you. You know Father and Grandpa and all our race way back were pioneers."

"What are pioneers?" interrupted Jo.

"They were," said Ben briefly. "All but Mother; she was a school-teacher when she

met Father. All his folks came over to this country a long time ago, and when they got here they landed right out in the wilderness, and they've been following it up ever since!"

"This isn't any wilderness," interrupted Jimmy. "We have a school-house, and stores in the village, and everything."

"It was wild enough, then," said Ben, "but as fast as it got settled, the wilderness kept moving along West, Father says, and they kept moving to catch up with it. When Father first emigrated here from Massachusetts, this was frontier country, but it's well settled now, so I guess he thought it was time to move on. He never did hanker after town life, and no more do I."

"Don't you think he'll ever come back here?" asked Jo anxiously. "Aunt Maria thinks he won't."

"No," said Ben, "I just don't; he'll keep on going West till he gets to the jumping-off place, and we'd better follow him! There's no good staying here, now Mother's gone."

After a moment of astonished silence, Jo found her voice.

"But, Ben," she said, "how can we go? What would become of everything here?"

"That's all fixed," Ben answered. "I talked with Peters after I got Father's letter, and he'll run the farm on shares again, just as Father said."

"Did you tell him about our going West?" demanded Jo.

"'Course I didn't," answered Ben. "I let him think we are going to Aunt Maria's. She's been telling him how she's going to be loaded down with two wild young ones, and he's believed it, and we've no call to tell him different."

"But, Ben —" Jo began again.

Ben interrupted her. "Not a single 'but,'" he said sturdily. "We've still got some of the money Father left when he went away, and Peters will advance something on the eggs and milk we shall not be here to share, and he's bought the pig. We'll take the oxen and the horses with us, and, once

we're on the way, I'll bet we can be as good pioneers as any of the others. Anyway, there's nothing else to do as far as I can see; so we've just got to risk it, and then — no whimpering, no matter what happens!"

He looked keenly at the startled and wondering faces before him.

"And now you know all about it. What

do you say? Are you game?" he asked.

"I'm your man, Ben!" cried Jimmy, bobbing up importantly; "just you count on me!"

Ben grinned. "What about you?" he asked, turning to Jo.

"It makes me all wobbly inside to think about it," quavered Jo. "But I want mighty bad to be with Father, and I guess I can go anywhere you and Jimmy do. Anyway, I'd rather be caught by Indians than live with Aunt Maria."

"Me too," added Jimmy.

"All right, then," said Ben. "That's settled, and here we go!" He rose from his chair and, going to a shelf in the corner, took down his old geography. "Let's take a look at the trip on the map," he said, laying the book on the table.

Jim and Jo were at his elbows in a moment, and the next hour was spent in tracing the long trail across the continent.

Most of the country west of the Missis-

sippi was marked "Great American Desert." The war with Mexico had ended only a little more than two years before, and a great stretch of country, including all of Texas, New Mexico, and California, had been added to the United States as a consequence, but it was not yet divided into the States as we know them now. The region was watered by mighty rivers, but settlements were few, and much of the land was arid and inhabited only by wandering bands of Indians and great herds of buffalo. There were bears and wolves also, and antelope and all sorts of wild game. This much the children knew, for since gold had been found little else had been talked of anywhere in the country but California and the trail.

"You see," said Ben, pointing to a spot on the map of Illinois, "this is where we are now, right south of Quincy. It isn't far to the old Mississippi and, once we get across that, we keep going west until we reach the Oregon Trail."

"It's awfully far," sighed Jo, tracing the route with her finger.

"It is," agreed Ben, "but Father's at the end of it—"

"And gold too," shouted Jimmy, giving way to his feelings. "Hooray! Hooray! no chores, no Aunt Maria—just picnics every day!" He flapped his arms and crowed like a rooster. "Cock-a-doodle-do!"

"Keep your crowing till the fight's over," said Ben. "There'll be many a time in the next few months when you'll wish you'd never heard of California! Now, stir your stumps, both of you, and get something to eat; it's time for dinner."

The next few weeks passed over the little family in the log farm-house as if on wings. Every afternoon the children hurried home from school, and evening after evening, when their meager supper was over, all three hurried out to the barn together, and the Twins took turns holding the lantern for Ben while he transformed the

great farm-wagon into a "prairie schooner."

"It's going to be just like a playhouse," said Jo, giving a delighted wriggle as she watched him bend long strips of wood in a high arch, fasten the ends to the wagon-box, and cover these ribs with canvas, "only where shall we sleep?"

"You'll sleep on hay in the corner of the wagon," said Ben, "and Jimmy and I will have a little tent. I've cut the poles for it already."

It is surprising how many things can be packed away in a small space if you know how to do it, and Ben soon became a wonderful packer. He stored supplies under the driver's seat, and packed the kettle, the frying pan, and the few tin dishes they were to take in a box which could also be used as a seat. More boxes held their supplies of flour, sugar, corn-meal, beans, salt pork, and bacon, and sacks of apples, potatoes, and cabbages left from their winter's store, with grain for the cattle and hay for bedding, filled the space that was left.

By the last of March, their preparations were nearly completed, and the children could scarcely wait to begin housekeeping in their new home on wheels.

At last, one night in April, as they were shutting the barn door after having taken a last loving look at the covered wagon, Ben said, "We can start now as soon as the grass gets green enough to pasture the cattle on the trail."

The very next morning, as Jo was washing dishes, she looked out the window and saw a red flag waving violently from the window of Billy Sanders's house, half a mile away. For a long time the children had had a private signaling code between the two houses, for of course there were no telephones in those days. They called it their "telegraph," and the signal was a red rag waved from the window of either house. Two waves up and down meant, "Come on over to the secret meeting-place." Four waves from left to right meant, "Can't come," and two waves meant, "All right,

coming." Their secret meeting-place was a straw stack with rough thatched shelter for the cows which stood beside a little zigzag stream that flowed through the pasture that lay between the two houses. Under this shelter the children had hollowed out a hole in the stack, and in this cave they played Robinson Crusoe, pirates, Indians, or David and Goliath; and in good weather they sometimes had a fire and roasted potatoes in the ashes beside the little stream. Whenever there was any exciting news in either house, the red rag was sure to wave distractedly from a window, and soon after a boy and a girl from one house and one small boy from the other could be seen racing across the field to the straw stack. During the weeks just passed they had had neither time nor heart for games, and had seen little of Billy except in school, so it was some time since the signal had waved from either house.

Jimmy instantly ran to the door and waved their red rag in reply, and a mo-

ment later the dish-pan was put away and both children were running toward the cave.

Billy got there first, and when the Twins came up he greeted them with whoops which showed plainly that something very particular was on his mind. It popped out of his mouth like an explosion in one wild burst of song; "Oh, Susanna, don't you cry for me, for I'm off to California with my banjo on my knee!" he howled. It was a song that every one in the country was singing at that time and the Twins were not impressed.

"Stop your bawling and tell us what's up," said Jimmy politely.

"That's what's up," answered Billy, "we're going to California! Paw says so! He told me this morning! He and Maw have known it a long time!"

The Twins were stunned to silence, which was lucky, for their secret must certainly have told itself if they had been able to speak at all. As it was, Jo clapped her

hands over her mouth and looked a warning at Jimmy, whose mouth was still open so wide that almost any piece of news might have dropped out of it.

"Well, I never!" Jo cried to Billy and then she added craftily, "My sakes! I'd like to be going too!" Jimmy, catching her

signal, shut his mouth, gulped, and said nothing.

"My, but wouldn't it be fun if you could!" said Billy, hopping up and down with excitement. "We're all going — Paw, Maw, Grandmaw, and me. Paw says it'll be a lot worse than when he came here from Kentucky, but Maw says she allows we'll take all the knocks that come from staying together, though of course it's awful dangerous. I s'pose we'll have to fight Indians and everything! I'm going to make a bow and arrow right away to take along."

It was more than the Twins could bear! Jo seized Jim by the arm. "Let's run home and tell Ben," she gasped, and, not daring to trust themselves another instant, the two children fled as if the dogs were after them.

Billy stared open-mouthed after their flying figures. They had not asked a single question nor lingered to talk over this world-shaking piece of news! He could not understand it, and now they were on the way to

tell the news—*his* news—to Ben! He made up his mind he would not be cheated out of this great moment, so he sped after them as fast as his short legs would carry him, and a moment later, panting and breathless, he burst in at the open door of the Miller barn. It was then his turn to be knocked speechless. There, right in front of his freckled nose, stood the "prairie schooner" in all the glory of its clean canvas, packed to the muzzle with camping-outfit and stores!

Ben was sitting on the wagon-tongue mending a harness, and before him stood the Twins both shouting the great news at him with all the power of their healthy lungs. Billy stood still in the doorway and gaped at the covered wagon with his eyes fairly popping out of his head. He was shrewd enough to see at once that such preparation was not made for a trip to Aunt Maria's farm, thirty miles away! It could mean but one thing; they were going to cross the plains, too!

Ben was the first to notice him. "Well, I'll be doggoned," he exclaimed, starting to his feet. "What are you doing here, you little Paul Pry?"

Billy pointed to the wagon and gasped: "You — you're all going to California, I bet! Oh, Susanna! I bet you're going too!"

Ben took him by the collar and gave him a little shake. "Who told you?" he demanded fiercely.

"Nobody — t-told me," stuttered Billy, wriggling to free himself. "I just f-found it out myself!"

"We didn't tell him, we never —" cried the Twins.

Ben looked shrewdly at the three faces, then let go of Billy's collar. "Look here, Billy," he said. "You've found it out, and that can't be helped now, but if you tell a living soul, I'll make mincemeat of you and feed you to the crows! It's a secret, and if it gets out there'll be an awful shindy and our plans will all be knocked to Kingdom Come!"

"And we'll have to go and live with Aunt Maria, and never see Ben nor Ginger nor you any more," added Jim.

Billy knew Aunt Maria. "I won't tell on you; honest to goodness I won't!" he sputtered. "Cross my heart, hope to die, I won't!"

"Mind you don't, then," said Ben. "Keep it to yourself if it busts you! When are your folks going to start?"

"Just as soon as the grass is high enough to pasture the cattle, Paw says," answered Billy. "When are you?"

"Same time," said Ben. "But we calculate to keep to ourselves until we're pretty well out on the prairies, for we don't propose to be turned back, no matter who says so."

III

THE RED RAG TELEGRAPH

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THE RED RAG TELEGRAPH

One morning late in April, when Jo opened the kitchen door, she heard the frogs piping in the little zigzag stream in the pasture. The prairies were covered with a carpet of green, meadowlarks were skimming and whistling in the crisp morning air, and the pussy-willows by the brook were already dangling silvery tassels in the breeze.

In the cherry tree by the door a pair of robins had finished a beautiful new nest. "Cherries are ripe, cherries are ripe, cherries are ripe in June," sang the father robin, swaying ecstatically on a branch just above her head, and Jo, looking up, could see the bright beady eyes of the mother bird as she sat brooding her blue eggs. There was no doubt about it, spring had really come.

Jo stood still to drink in the morning freshness, until, happening to glance across the field, she saw the red rag telegraph swinging frantically from the Sanders back door.

"Billy's calling like everything; come on!" she said to Jimmy, who was coming from the barn, and, not waiting to return the signal, the two ran toward the cave with Ginger flying along at their heels. Billy was there before them, almost too breathless to speak.

"We're going!" he gasped. "I just came to say good-bye! Maw and Paw have been up since before daylight. The wagon's all packed and Grandmaw's been sitting with her bonnet on and raring to go this half-hour!"

"Oh, Billy, you haven't told about us, have you?" cried Jo.

"Not me. Not a single word!" declared Billy. "Never! I never let on a single word once! I just told Maw I was coming to tell you good-bye, and she said: 'Well, get moving then, and give 'em my love. Your

Paw is champing at the bit this minute fretting to be gone.'"

"We'll run back with you," said Jo, "and say good-bye." And in another instant three pairs of legs were sprinting across the open fields toward the Sanders farm.

"Listen," gasped Billy, as they ran, "I'm going to pin the red rag to the tail end of our wagon, and you keep looking for it, and when you see it you'll know it's us, even if we're ever so far off!"

"And we'll pin ours on the front of our wagon," panted Jo, "and when you see that you'll know we're coming."

"I'll keep my eyes peeled," promised Billy.

When they came alongside the covered wagon, Mr. Sanders was already on the driver's seat with Grandmaw beside him. "All ready, Maw," he called, bending from his seat to tickle Jimmy in the ribs with the butt end of the whip.

"Comin', Paw," answered his wife. She kissed Jo, and would have kissed Jimmy

too if he hadn't ducked. "Say good-bye to Ben," she said, giving him a pat instead, "and if we see your paw, we'll tell him all about you, and your Aunt Maria. I reckon her bark is maybe worse'n her bite, so don't you be scairt of her, anyway, even if you do have to live with her. Your paw'll be comin' back with a pile of money some day and —"

"Come along, Maw!" cried Mr. Sanders, waving the whip.

"Comin', Paw!" she answered. "Up you go, Billy boy!" She boosted Billy into the back of the wagon, and, climbing quickly after him, seated herself among the bags and boxes. "Get goin', Paw," she called, "or I'll bust right out cryin' this minute."

"Giddap!" shouted Paw, cracking the whip. The mule-team plunged forward. The long journey was begun!

The children stood still in the road to watch them until all they could distinguish in the distance was Billy's dangling legs and Billy's hands waving the red rag up and down like a small but very lively tail to the

cart. Then they ran back home with a strange choky feeling in their throats.

When they reached their own door again, they were surprised to find Ben taking down the beds.

"What are you doing that for?" demanded Jim.

"I'm going to shut up all our truck in the big room," said Ben. "We've got to get started, too, and the sooner the better. I calculate we'd better keep as close as we can to the Sanders outfit, without their knowing it until we're well out on the prairies. They've got a faster team than ours and we'll have to make tracks to keep anywhere near them, so we'll start to-night."

"To-night?" gasped the Twins.

"Yep," said Ben, "to-night! I want to get shut of questions, and the best way to do that is to leave when there isn't light enough for folks to see who we are. Hurry up and eat your hasty pudding, so you can help."

The children were far too excited to spend

any length of time over their breakfast, and in a few moments all three were hard at work, moving their meager store of furniture into the big room, and, when this task was done, Jimmy was sent to the Peters farm with a note to tell Mr. Peters that he could come whenever he liked to get the live stock.

"Why do I have to leave a note? Why can't I just tell him?" Jimmy demanded in an aggrieved tone.

"'Cause he thinks we're setting out for Aunt Maria's," answered Ben, "and you'll never get through without blabbing or else telling a lie! You just hand that note to Maw Peters, and skedaddle back home as fast as your legs will carry you!"

While he was gone, Ben and Jo packed their few clothes in a battered old leather trunk, piled the blankets in the wagon, and gathered the eggs. Then, while Ben fed the cattle and the chickens and milked the cow, Jo boiled these eggs and many others and packed them away to take with them on their journey.

The shadows of late afternoon were merging into dusk when Jimmy came back from the Peters farm, and the three ate their supper of bread, milk, and eggs standing up in the desolate kitchen. Not a word was said during that last meal in the old house, for not one of the three dared speak lest he be overtaken by tears. When the last crumb was gone, Ben and Jimmy went at once to the barn, and, while Ben yoked the oxen and hitched them to the cart, Jim saddled the two farm-horses, Topsy and Selim, and strapped on their packs; for the Twins were to begin the journey on horseback, leaving Ben to drive the ox-team.

Left alone in the empty house, Jo brushed away the crumbs, swept the rude hearth with a turkey's wing, and poured water over the dying embers of the fire. There was nothing more to be done, and she stood alone in the gathering dusk to look for the last time about the barren room that had been her home all the years of her short life. In it she and her brothers had been

born. Faint memories that she could not have put into words came back to her, the smell of wood smoke, the pungent odor of catnip tea steeping upon the hearth, the feeling of being rocked in her mother's lap before the fire, and of being tucked away in the trundle-bed at night. She remembered lying there in sleepy content watching the firelight flicker about the room and listening to the murmur of voices, or the patter of rain on the roof. The feeling of waking to the morning freshness came back to her, with pictures of her mother moving about her homely tasks, or sitting with her sewing beside the window. Young as she was, Jo knew — how well she knew! — that these things could never be again. With the closing of the door behind her the first chapters of her life were ended, and a new world would be opened before her. For a moment she stood still remembering all these things and many more, then, going to the window where her mother's chair had always been, she knelt beside it and left a kiss upon the

rough sill. "Good-bye, Mother!" she whispered. "Good-bye, old house!" A moment she lingered there, then, rising softly, put on her shawl and sunbonnet and went out, closing the door quietly behind her.

When she reached the barn, she found Ben and Jim standing in the doorway

gazing at the sky, with Ginger beside them.

"Lucky for us it's warm and a good moon," said Ben. "We can maybe get to the river before it's time to turn in for the night."

"Let's start, then," urged Jim; "it's almost as dark as it's going to be." Jo slipped behind them into the barn. She said good-bye to the cow, took a last look at the hens drowsing on their perches, and even waved her hand to the pig, though he had never been a favorite of hers; then she came back to the door.

"Here we go!" said Ben, swinging her up on Topsy's back. Jim was already mounted on Selim, and the two started down the lane together.

"Gee up there!" cried Ben, cracking his whip, and the oxen followed the horses into the cart-path, then stood still while Ben closed the barn door and came back with Ginger walking beside him, to take his place at the head of the team.

Once on the big road, the three travelers lingered for a last look at the log farmhouse, standing dark and alone in the moonlight; then they turned their faces resolutely westward.

IV
PIONEERS

IV

PIONEERS

UNDER the spell of the warm spring evening and the excitement of the great adventure, the young pioneers pressed on and on until the waning moon warned them that it was time to get some sleep in order to be ready for the next day's journey. Ben's legs were already weary, and even the strong oxen had slowed down their steady pace when at last they came to a little rise in the level stretch of prairie.

As they reached it, Ben called to the children, who were riding ahead: "Time to turn in. We'll camp at the top of the hill."

"All right," Jim called back, "we'll go ahead and pick out the spot."

He gave Selim a little slap on the flank, and both horses broke into a gallop. They reached the crest in a moment, and drew

rein to gaze at the lovely scene spread out before their surprised eyes. There, not half a mile away, lay the mighty "Father of Waters" gleaming like a huge highway of silver in the pale moonlight. For an instant both children were too awed to say a word, but silence was never Jo's strong point, and she soon turned Topsy about and galloped back to the ox-team.

"Oh, Ben!" she cried, reining in beside him, "what do you think! We're almost at the river! You can see it from up there!"

"You don't say!" exclaimed Ben. "We're farther along than I reckoned," and, urging on his tired beasts, he, too, soon reached the summit of the rise and stood in his turn spell-bound by the majesty of the Mississippi.

Jim had already dismounted and was unstrapping the saddle-pack from Selim's back. "Hey, there!" he called, "don't stand gawping at the river all night! Come on and help me set up the tent."

Ben turned his back on the Mississippi and surveyed his young brother.

"Who elected you boss of this outfit?" he demanded, and, turning Jim deftly over his knee, he deposited one swift spank where he thought it would do the most good and set him upright again. "There, now, young rooster," he admonished, "mind you don't get too all-fired smart! On this trip you and Sis have got to mind me same as if I was your father. It's the only way to get along and keep out of trouble."

Jim rubbed the spot a little ruefully.

"All right, Paw," he said mockingly, "call me when you want me!" He sat down on the saddle-pack and hugged his knees.

Ben assisted him to his feet by one ear. "Unhitch the oxen and tether them and the horses so they can graze," he commanded, and, grinning sheepishly, Jim obeyed.

"Why do you need to set up the tent at all?" asked Jo, who had kept at a safe distance during this little passage at arms; "it isn't raining and the ground's not very wet."

"There's some sense to that," agreed Ben, looking thoughtfully at the sky. "We can

spread the canvas on the ground, fling some hay on it, and sleep like tops."

With this plan making camp was a simple process. The wagon was drawn up beside the road, and, while Ben drove stakes into the ground and Jim tethered the oxen and

horses to them, Jo made a bed for the boys beside a little group of wild crab trees just bursting into bloom. Soon the cattle were feeding quietly on the rich prairie grass, with Ginger guarding them like a sentinel on duty.

"I wish apple-pie and cheese and doughnuts grew all over the ground for us, so we could feed ourselves as easy as they do," said Jim, looking enviously at Selim and Topsy. "I'm hungry too."

"So'm I," said Jo.

"Wouldn't mind a bite myself," said Ben, and, climbing into the wagon, he delved among the provisions and soon reappeared with his hands full of apples. He gave one to Jim and one to Jo, and all three roosted in a row on the wagon-tongue, in the moonlight, to eat them.

"As I observe to Reynolds, I don't know as there's anything I like better'n eating," remarked Jim, in waggish imitation of Aunt Maria as he finished the core.

"Unless it's sleep," agreed Ben, yawning.

"It's time for all of us to turn in, and here's how!" He fished out the blankets from the back of the wagon, tossed some to Jim, and, wrapping himself in others, flung himself down on the rough bed, with Jo's saddle for a pillow. Jim followed suit, using his own saddle, and the two boys were soon sound asleep. Jo climbed back to her own bed in the wagon, but sleep refused to come to her so easily. She lay on the heap of hay and watched the moon sailing past the scudding clouds, and the friendly stars winking down at her, until, lulled by the soft sound of the cattle cropping the prairie grass and by the croaking of frogs in some near-by marsh, she, too, fell asleep.

She woke next morning from her strange bed a little bewildered and not a little stiff, to find Ben and Jim already yoking the oxen. She had no clock to guide her, but she saw that the shadows lay in long dark stripes across the level prairie and knew by that that it must still be very early. She poked her head out of the canvas opening and gave

her brothers a gay greeting. "Howdy!" she called. "Whatever are you moving now for? Aren't we going to have any breakfast?"

"You bet we are!" Jim called back. "But we've got to have water, haven't we? The cattle haven't had any since we left home except what they got out of the grass."

"Water!" cried Jo, "why, of course!" Not until that moment had she realized its full importance in their long journey.

"We'll have to go down to the river to get it; there's none short of that," said Ben. "Haw, there, Buck! Back, can't you!" He guided the oxen into position, fastened the wagon-tongue to the yoke, and, swinging the whip over their patient backs, brought the wagon into the road again.

Jim had already saddled the horses and was rolling the blankets into the tent-pack. "I'll follow in a minute," he called; "don't wait," and the wagon went creaking down the hill. As they neared the river, the roads grew muddier and muddier, for the land was low and the spring floods had overflowed

the banks. The wagon rocked from side to side as it wallowed in and out of the ruts; the oxen struggled and strained to keep their footing, and Jo knew, as she clung to the ribs of the canvas shelter, why the emigrant wagons were called "prairie schooners." Like a ship in a high sea it floundered along until they reached the very brink of the river itself and could measure the force of the powerful current sweeping by.

Jo looked at it with a quaking heart. "How are we ever going to get across?" she asked Ben, as he halted the team on a platform made of logs laid side by side in the mud at the river's edge and extending in a rude dock out into the stream.

"There'll be a boat along sometime," Ben answered. "There has to be some way of getting over or there'd be a lot of folks camping here. The Sanders team came by this road, and they aren't here, so I guess they must have got across last night."

Just then Jim joined them, riding Selim and leading Topsy by the halter, with Gin-

ger following at their heels. "Breakfast ready?" he called.

Jo tumbled out of the wagon. "You get me three flat stones and some dry leaves," she said capably, "and I'll see if I can't make a fire the way we used to when we roasted potatoes in the pasture at home." She had the cooking-kit out in a twinkling and began to cut slices of bacon and put them in the frying-pan.

Jim dismounted, tied the horses to a tree, and surveyed the mud all about them with a disgusted eye. "On the top of this blamed hill you can't get any water, and at the bottom of it you can't get anything else," he grumbled. "You can never get a fire to burn here."

"Bet you I can," said Jo, with spirit. "Get along with you and hunt driftwood."

She gave him a little push, and Jim leaped off the dock into the soft mud at the river's edge. In a few moments he was back again, very muddy, but bringing the stones and a few dry leaves gathered from low-growing

bushes, and some dead twigs and broken branches cast ashore by the current. Jo took them and sent him for more while she spatted down a flat place in the clay beside the logs and, placing the stones in a triangle, filled the space between them with the dry leaves and twigs.

"Lucky I didn't forget to lay in a store of sulphur matches," said Ben, as he stooped to light the pile. "Water and fire — we've got to have those two things, whatever else we go without."

Soon a lively blaze was crackling under the pot, which Ben had filled from the river, and, while Jim foraged for more fuel, Jo cooked the bacon and stirred a little salt and some corn-meal together in a dipper. When the water boiled, she poured some of it into the mixture and stirred it to a thick paste, then dropped spoonfuls into the hot bacon fat.

"Um-yum," purred Jim, sniffing the tantalizing odor and gazing at the frying-pan with his soul in his eyes, "you bet I'm glad I came."

Jo speared a fat brown cake, put it on a plate, set the plate on a log, and turned to the frying-pan for another. It was only for an instant, but in that instant Ginger saw the cake, concluded that it was placed there for him, and eagerly snapped it up. There was an astonished yelp, and, when Jo turned again to the plate, there was Ginger with his

tail between his legs and a mournful howl streaming behind him, dashing toward the river! He did not even stop when he reached the brink, but went in all over, drinking as if he meant to drink the river dry. When he came out again and had shaken himself, he crept under the wagon and, refusing all comfort, lay there for some time with his nose on his paws and his eyes rolling reproachfully at the frying-pan.

When every one had eaten and the camp kit was put away again, there was nothing more for them to do. They could not move on, for there in front of them lay the mighty river, guarding, like a gigantic dragon, the approach to the land of their dreams. For a long time they sat in a disconsolate row on a fallen log, gazing up stream and down and seeing nothing but the swiftly flowing river and the half-drowned trees along its flooded banks.

"It's just like the children of Israel in front of the Red Sea," said Jo mournfully.

"Well," said Ben, "there aren't any

Egyptians behind to follow us up — that's something."

"There's Aunt Maria," said Jim. "She's behind us." He kicked his heels impatiently on the log. "Seems as if I'd bust if I have to sit here like a frog much longer," he growled. "I've nigh grown fast to my seat."

"Look here, young fellow," said Ben, "the rule of this outfit is no whimpering — no matter what happens."

"Who's whimpering?" said Jim resentfully.

Ben did not reply to this poser, for at that moment a shrill whistle from down stream cut the air like a knife.

"There she comes! There she comes!" shouted Jim, and all three dashed at once to the end of the dock. Ginger, forgetting his griefs, bounded after them, and they all stood together on the logs, gazing eagerly down the river, until around a bend came something that few people in the whole world had seen at that time — a steamboat!

It came paddling along through the water like a monstrous duck, leaving a flood of white foam in its wake, sending up clouds of black smoke from its funnel, its steam whistle shrieking like a demon as it neared the dock. Ben and the Twins waved all their arms and legs and yelled at the top of their lungs to make sure they were seen, and Ginger ran back and forth, barking like a whole pack of dogs after a woodchuck.

"Tut, tut, tut!" shrieked the steam whistle, as though to say, "Don't go crazy —we see you," and soon the puffing engine stopped puffing, and the boat drew quietly up to the end of the dock. A gang-plank was thrust out from an opening in its side, and a stout, red-faced man, with a cap on his head and a beard "like a blackberry-patch," Jo said, walked across it to the dock and took a look at the children and the covered wagon.

"Goin' across?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said Ben.

"All right, get aboard, then," said the

man, "and be quick about it. I ain't got time to linger. Where's your paw?"

"He's in California," answered Ben, standing up as tall as possible. "We're going out to meet him."

"You don't say you and them two young 'uns is goin' acrost the plains *alone!*" said the man, amazed.

"We're going to catch up with some friends on the road," said Ben; "they must have crossed last night."

The captain looked Ben over from top to toe.

"Well, dog my cats, if that don't beat me!" he commented; "you'd ought to be sent back where you come from!"

"There's nobody to send us back to, sir," said Ben.

"Maw dead?" asked the man. Ben nodded. The man took off his cap and scratched his head. "I'll be doggoned if I know what to do," he cried. "Seems like I ought not to be a party to this here!"

A few curious passengers on the boat

leaned over the deck-rail to see what was going on, and the deck-hands, standing ready to draw in the gang-plank, looked in astonishment at the little group of resolute pioneers on the dock.

Finally the puzzled captain had a bright thought. "You ain't got any money, have you?" he asked hopefully.

"Yes, sir," said Ben, drawing out the old tobacco-pouch in which he kept their little store.

The captain's face fell. "Dog my cats!" he exclaimed, "if you hadn't the spondulicks, I could refuse to take you! Let me heft your pile!" He took the little bag in his hand. It was not very heavy, and he scratched his head again more hopelessly than before as he handed it back. "Well, it ain't my funeral; get aboard," he sighed at last.

Jo, Jim, and Ginger had been standing anxiously by while the captain was making up his mind and, fearing lest he might change it, Ben and the Twins hurried back

to move the team, and in a moment more they were all on board. The whistle gave an hysterical shriek, the paddle-wheels began to churn the water, and the boat moved out into the river. The crossing passed all too quickly for the excited travelers, and they were almost sorry when the boat drew up to a little dock on the opposite shore a few miles up the river.

"Well, here you be," said the captain, as the gang-plank was again thrust out, and Ben stood, tobacco-pouch in hand, ready to pay for their passage. "Here you be! Put up your purse! I've got enough to answer for without takin' money for bein' a baby-killer!"

Ben flushed, but stood his ground manfully. "I've got money," he said; "we aren't beggars — nor yet babies!"

"Haw, haw!" roared the captain, "dog my cats, I like your spunk! I hope you'll git there and meet your paw and make your pile! Now, git along with you; you're henderin' progress!" Ignoring the tobacco-

pouch, he gently herded them toward the gang-plank, and, taking the rein from Jo's hand, himself led Topsy ashore. Jim took care of Selim, and Ben had his hands full with the oxen, and, when they turned to thank the captain, the gang-plank was already taken in, and a yard or more of water yawned between the boat and the shore. Until it was well out in midstream they could see the captain standing by the gangway and could almost hear him dogging his cats as he scratched his head and looked with gruff anxiety after the young emigrants.

"Thank you — thank you!" they shouted, and were answered by a cheer from the men and a shriek from the whistle as the boat rounded a bend and disappeared from sight.

All that day and for many days after they plodded steadily westward over roads that were scarcely more than ruts in the soft, wet prairie soil. Jim and Jo rode the horses, and the oxen toiled along with the covered wagon, wallowing, creaking, and

groaning behind them. On and on over the level land, spreading like a sea to the horizon's edge in every direction they went. On and on, with such a monotonous succession of days that at night it hardly seemed they had progressed at all, for the landscape they looked out upon might just as well have been the very one to which they had awakened in the morning.

The first night after crossing the river, they camped on Lone Tree Prairie, the second they slept luxuriously on a straw stack, and on the third they came to a ford too deep for their team, and were forced to turn out of their course until they found a safe crossing. A week passed in this way, and still the prairies, now gay with spring wild flowers, stretched endlessly before them. Sometimes Jim took a turn at driving the oxen while Ben rode Selim, and, when Jo was tired of the saddle, she climbed into the back of the wagon and lay on her hay bed, listening to the regular creaking of the wheels until it seemed to her as if the

wagon itself were droning a kind of sleepy song, "R-r-rumble, grumble, grumble, here we go! R-r-rumble, grumble, grumble, rocking to and fro." Over and over it crooned itself into her drowsy ear until she either dropped off to sleep or was roused by some particularly bumpy place in the road or by feeling the wagon sink suddenly to its hubs in a mud hole.

As soon as they were safely across the Mississippi, they had begun to watch the long trail stretching out before them for a wagon with a red rag hanging from the rear, but their hope of overtaking it grew less and less as the days passed slowly by.

"I reckon we're not going to catch up with the Sanders outfit after all," said Ben at last, when ten days had passed and there was still no sign of them. "They have a faster team, but I calculated they'd slow down and rest a good bit on account of Grandmaw."

"Maw Sanders says Grandmaw is a right peart old woman," said Jo gloomily.

"She says she can keep up with any of them." For a moment she almost wished that Grandmaw were less "peart" — at least until they could overtake their friends — for the novelty of their adventure had a little worn off by this time, and each day increased their discomforts. Their clothes, few and old to begin with, were now dirty past belief, caked with mud, and worn with riding in the saddle. If this was their condition in ten days, what would be left of them in five long months?

They were now traveling on a highway which, while not very good, was better than the soft mud through which they had struggled so far, and on it, though there were a few emigrant wagons, not one flaunted a welcoming red flag before their eager eyes.

Two weeks passed by in continued disappointments; then at last Ben said: "We've got to stop and give the team a rest, even if we never catch up with the Sanders outfit. I don't dare push the oxen so hard, or they may give out."

"All right," sighed Jo; "I s'pose we've got to do it, but I hate like poison to give up finding them."

"So do I," said Ben, "but there's no help for it. We'll keep on until we come to a good clear stream and then we'll tie up for a day or two. I've got to do some tinkering and grease the wagon again."

"And I'll wash our clothes," said Jo resignedly.

Jim said nothing, but he was glum with disappointment all the rest of the day.

To add to their discouragement it began to rain — a soft spring drizzle. Jo tied Topsy to the tail-board and took refuge in the wagon, but Jim kept doggedly on on Selim's back, with Ginger padding softly beside him. All that afternoon no satisfactory stream appeared, and night closed in dark and dismal.

"Ride ahead a little way and see if you can't find a place to camp where there's water," said Ben to Jim, "for if there isn't a stream somewhere near, we've got to

catch rainwater for the cattle and camp, anyway. It's too dark to drive."

Jim gave Selim a slap and was instantly swallowed up in the thick darkness. In half an hour he was back again.

"There's a stream a little farther on," he said, drawing up beside the wagon. "There are trees near it, and we'll have to camp there, anyway, for it's not safe to try to ford it in the dark."

"All right," said Ben, and on they trudged through the thick darkness until they neared the river. Here Ben stopped, lit a lantern, and gave it to Jim.

"Go ahead with that," he said, "and mind you don't lead us into a hole when we leave the road!"

Swinging the lantern as near the ground as he could and groping his way from step to step, Jim guided the team from the road to a little knoll, and there they halted. It is no easy matter to make a camp in darkness, when you are wet, tired, and hungry; but at last the task was finished, the cattle fed

and watered, and it was time for the three travelers to think of their own supper. It was too wet to make a fire, so they huddled together in the wagon and ate pilot bread and the last of the eggs that Jo had boiled and packed away before leaving home.

It was a forlorn, weary, homesick little group of pioneers that lay down on their rude hay beds that night, and if a few tears were shed under the cover of darkness, no one saw them; but the sound of rain falling gently on the tent roof and the canvas cover of the wagon at last soothed them to sleep.

V

MORNING IN CAMP

V

MORNING IN CAMP

JIM was the first one to wake in the morning. The sun was shining brightly, making a soft white light in the tent, when he opened his eyes and found that Ginger, who shared their shelter, was gone. He heard him barking as if he had at last found the woodchuck for which he was always hopefully searching, and, eager to see what the excitement was about, he crept out of the tent without waking Ben, to go in search of him.

It had been too dark the night before to see anything but the black trunks of the trees through which they had groped their way, but the clear morning light revealed a well-appointed camp beside the creek, which had been swollen by the spring rains into a deep and hurrying river. Beyond the

tent stood the covered wagon belonging to the outfit, with Ginger nosing about it and barking distractedly.

"Come here, Ginger, stop your noise," said Jim, and, stepping quietly by the wagon, he took a look at it from behind. There, hanging from the canvas, a red rag swayed gently in the morning breeze before his delighted eyes! For one delirious moment he gazed at it, then he added to Ginger's excited barking a loud whoop of joy. "Billy! Oh, Billee," he called.

Immediately the tent was shaken by an inner convulsion and from under the flap, on one side, appeared Billy's tousled head and freckled nose, and from the other, the amazed face of Paw Sanders!

Jo and Ben came bouncing out of their rough beds the instant they heard Jim's shout. Maw Sanders and Grandmaw stuck their heads out of the round opening at the back of their wagon, and for a moment the air was filled with cries of "Well, I never!" and "Who ever would have thought it?"

and "What upon earth?" as the amazed Sanders family gazed upon the adventurous young pioneers. You should have seen Billy then! He swelled with the importance of having shared in the tremendous secret, until it seemed likely that he would burst.

"I knew it all the time! 'Tisn't any surprise to me, but I never let on a single once!" he shouted, trying to make himself heard above the general uproar of questions that everybody asked and nobody answered. In such a hubbub explanations were impossible, and soon Maw Sanders climbed down into the middle of the excited group and took command of the situation.

"You all listen to me!" she cried, spatting her hands together to get their attention and make herself heard; "it doesn't make such a heap of difference how they came—they're here, and if we're ever to have any breakfast, you all have got to do something besides stand round and jaw! Get busy, now—all of you. Paw, you and Ben tend to the cattle; Jim, you and Billy go and hunt

something that'll burn; Grandmaw, you sit in the wagon while Jo and I get out the camp kit and start the fire." She seized a tin pail and handed it to Jo. "Take this and bring some water from the river," she said. "Now, vamoose, all of you!" She waved her arms as if shooing a flock of chickens out of a garden-patch, and the group obediently broke up to carry out her orders.

Paw Sanders chuckled as he started with Ben for the cattle. "She's a great old girl, is Maw!" he said. "She missed her proper sphere—she'd ought to have been a general in the army! The worst thing about Maw is, she's allus right, so you might just as well give in to her first as last. She's a great commander, is Maw!"

While they fed and watered the oxen, mules, and horses of their combined outfits, Ben told his story to Paw, and Jo poured into Maw's sympathetic ear, as she made the fire and cooked the breakfast, such a moving tale of Aunt Maria and their ad-

ventures, that the coffee boiled over and nearly put out the fire.

Grandmaw listened attentively from her throne in the back of the wagon. "I don't blame you a mite, for gettin' your dander riz," she said approvingly. "You done right to give her the slip. Pity she didn't follow you and get stuck in the mud somewheres, for keeps! Down in old Kaintuck, where I was raised—"

Maw cut in on her reminiscences.

"They'd have to rope me and throw me before I'd ever give in to livin' with Aunt Maria myself," she declared. "She's got a face on her that would addle a new-laid egg."

"Then you won't try to send us home, will you?" said Jo a little anxiously. "You'll let us follow you on the trail?"

"Sure and certain you can follow!" cried Maw, setting the frying-pan on a fallen log to give Jo a reassuring pat. "Paw and I wouldn't have it any other way now you're here, but if you had told us before you

started, I'd never dared to say yes to such a crazy plan."

"Shucks!" snorted Grandmaw, under her breath. "Ketch me! — Huh! I'd have egged ye on!"

"That's why Ben wouldn't let us tell any one," said Jo. "Even now Peters thinks we've gone to Aunt Maria's."

Maw stirred the coals with a forked stick and chuckled. "Ben's a deep one," she commented. "There, the bacon's fried and the coffee's ready!" She put her large, capable hands to her mouth and sent a call ringing over the prairie that brought all the hungry emigrants to the fire on the run.

It was too wet to sit down anywhere, so they stood up to eat their corn-cake and bacon and drink their coffee; all but Grandmaw. She sat enthroned in the back of the wagon with her feet hanging out and ate quite elegantly from a tin plate on her lap. After breakfast there was a council of war, at which Paw Sanders presided (with much

help from Maw), and it was formally arranged that the two families should travel together, each supplying its share of food and camp labor.

"This river, I take it, is the Nodaway," said Paw, consulting a map. "It runs into the Missouri some distance below here, so we know where we are, at any rate. We've been here in this camp two days already, resting the mules while we cleaned up the wagon and harness and greased the wheels. I reckoned on moving along to-day, but this blamed river has got so spirited since the rains I dassn't try to ford it till it quiets down a bit."

"That's no cross to me," said Maw cheerfully. "A little more rest won't do Grandmaw a mite of harm, and it'll give me a chance to do some washing."

"Shucks!" sniffed Grandmaw disdainfully. "I reckon a woman that's raised eleven children can set still and ride without gettin' all wore out. You're sp'iled, that's what ails ye. You can lay it to the river and

washin', but I allow I kin wear out the hull kit of ye yet."

Paw Sanders roared.

"That's right, Grandmaw!" he shouted. "Don't you let 'em make a cat's-paw out of you!"

And Maw inquired of nobody in particular, "Don't she beat all, though?" She paused in the act of hunting for the soap to cast a motherly eye over Ben and the Twins. "I reckon it won't do any damage to clean you up some, too," she said. "You boys change into clean clothes, and I'll show Jo how to wash the dirty ones. You sure do look Godforsaken the way you are."

It was not to be expected that Jim would greet this programme with enthusiasm, but at last, under Maw's urgency, the change was made, and soon Jo followed her to the river, carrying a discouraging pile of soiled clothes. For hours the two bent over a fallen log at the river's brink, soaping, scrubbing, and rinsing the clothes in the stream,

then wringing them out and hanging them on the bushes to dry.

Jim and Billy, meanwhile, spent a happy morning with Ginger, digging worms for bait and fishing farther up the river. Paw and Ben, when they had finished washing the Miller wagon and greasing its wheels, took their guns and went out on the prairie in search of game, and Grandmaw was left sitting by the camp-fire, smoking her corn-cob pipe and watching a kettle of beans that Maw had left to simmer.

"Now, while the clothes are drying," said Maw to Jo, when their back-breaking task was finished, "I've got a good notion to cut off your hair!"

"Ow!" gasped Jo, clutching her dark braids, "what for? Who ever heard of such a thing?"

"'Cause you can't keep it tidy and it's a heap of trouble on the trail. It's only sense, and if I was you I'd leave off those calico dresses, too, that are nigh worn to ravelings, anyway. They'll never stand the trip, and overalls are a sight cheaper and less work. Nobody'll know—excepting us—that you aren't a real, genuine boy, and when you get out where your Paw is, you'll maybe have something that looks like a dress to put on. If you don't, you'll have to get new ones, and it beats me to know how you'd even get them made on the trail. There's no time for any sewing to speak of."

"Well, I never!" said Jo, startled by this novel idea. She thought it over a moment.

"I have to ride the horses like a boy, anyway," she said at last. "We haven't any but men's saddles for Topsy and Selim."

"You'd look a heap more sensible, that's my view," said Maw; and without further discussion she got her scissors and a bowl and led the way past the clump of bushes where the clothes were drying. Here, out of sight of the camp, she loosened Jo's braids, clapped the bowl on her head, and snip, snip, snip went the scissors, sending cold shivers down Jo's back as the dark strands fell all about her on the ground. Entering into the spirit of the change, Jo hunted up a pair of Jim's overalls, and in a few moments there, in place of a little black-haired girl in a worn-out calico dress, stood a black-headed boy in faded overalls.

"There you are, now," said Maw, turning her round to admire her handiwork, "and you don't look so very bad, after all."

Encouraged by this modest compliment, Jo felt her shorn head.

"I wish I could see myself," she said; "it feels so funny!"

"Not a looking-glass in the outfit," said Maw; "they've been no comfort to me this long time." Jo went down to a little pool at the water's edge and, hanging over it, got a crooked glimpse of herself in the water.

"I only wish I could cut loose the same way," sighed Maw, as Jo came back from the river. "It certainly does appear to me that women have the heavy end of this job; they have to go through all that the men do on the trail, everlastingly getting tied up in their petticoats besides." She looked down at her ample figure and chuckled. "I suppose maybe it might not be so becoming to me," she said, "but there's mighty little use in thinking about what looks well — on this trip. We've just got to be satisfied with handsome is as handsome does."

Jo gave her a hug. "You surely do look good to me, Maw Sanders," she said fervently.

When they got back to camp, Jim and Billy were just returning from their fishing excursion, proudly bearing three little fish strung on a willow twig, but when they saw Jo, they were so astonished at her changed appearance that for a moment they even forgot to display their catch. They stood with their mouths open, staring at her, and then

burst into roars of laughter. "Girl boy! Girl boy!" they shouted, pointing their fingers at Jo. Maw Sanders swooped down upon them like an outraged hen with one chick, and seized them each by an available ear.

"You mind your manners," she said, "or I'll dress you both up in petticoats and see how you like climbing in and out of wagons and doing men's work with skirts slapping about your heels and tripping you up!"

The boys subsided, crestfallen, but poor Jo had another gantlet yet to run when Ben and Paw came back to camp, bringing two prairie chickens and a rabbit as the result of the afternoon's hunting. In the end they agreed with Maw, that it was sensible to dress according to your job, but Grandmaw remained unconvinced and critical.

"'Tain't natur'," she said; "women was foreordained to petticoats Give 'em pants and there's no tellin' what they'll want next — first thing you know they'll want to vote, like as not! Times ain't what they used to be

when I was a girl; looks like now'days women ain't got no proper sense of their inferiority. Woman's place is in the home — that's what I says."

VI

THE NODAWAY FORD

VI

THE NODAWAY FORD

For still another day they lingered before the river became shallow enough for them to ford, and during this time the camp lived on the fat of the land. Maw was a wonderful cook, and with prairie chickens shot by Paw and Ben, and the rabbits, not to mention the fish caught by Billy and Jim, they feasted like lords. The cattle became frisky from rest and fresh pasturage, and when on the morning of the third day Paw roused the sleepers with a shout of "Up, boys, and at 'em! We've got to make twenty miles to-day!" the whole camp sprang to life as one man. "No time for style this morning; we've got to eat with our loins girded, just like the Israelites when they lit out for the Promised Land," he said, as the travelers assembled about the fire. "Take your provender in your hands, and get through with

it. I'm just sp'ilin' to get across this here Red Sea."

Maw was busy handing out great rounds of pilot bread and pieces of bacon while he talked, and they ate it in their fingers to save dish-washing; and by seven o'clock the oxen and mules were again hitched to the wagons, the horses were saddled and their packs strapped on, and the caravan assembled at the river's brink ready for the crossing.

"I'll go over first and find the best footing," said Ben, and, springing on Selim's back, he rode cautiously down the steep bank and plunged into the stream. "Good sandy bottom here," he called back as he guided Selim back and forth up stream and down, "but I want to be sure it's wide enough for the wagons." The little group on shore watched him with growing anxiety as the water rose higher and higher on Selim's flanks. They saw Ben climb to his knees on the saddle to keep from getting wet. "The current's pretty swift here," he

called back, "but the bottom still seems good—" Then suddenly, as he said the words, without an instant's warning, he and Selim both disappeared from sight! A frightened cry rose from the watchers on the bank.

"A hole!" shouted Paw Sanders, and, leaping from his wagon-seat, he snatched a coil of rope from the peg where it hung and dashed toward the river. Before he could reach it, however, Ben's head reappeared above the swirling waters and Selim was seen struggling to regain a foothold on the treacherous bottom. For a moment horse and rider were borne down stream by the swift current, Ben clinging desperately to Selim's bridle and trying to get back again into the saddle. He could not swim, but fortunately Selim could, and after a few agonizing moments horse and rider stood dripping on the opposite bank.

"Don't try to cross there!" cried Ben, when he had wiped some of the mud out of his eyes.

"Think I'm a darn fool?" Paw roared back. "Think I want to drown 'em all like a batch of kittens? That's quicksand in there, if it ain't a hole! We'll have to go farther up stream!"

"Don't try to come back!" screamed Maw to Ben; "thrash your arms around and keep moving so you won't get chilled!"

"We'll follow you up stream on this side," bellowed Paw, as he hung up the rope and led the mules forward.

Billy was behind his father's wagon with Jim and the ox-team, and Jo brought up the rear on Topsy. In and out among the trees creaked the wagons, and Jo, impatient of their slow progress, rode Topsy forward along the river-bank, hoping to keep Ben in sight as he made his way up the opposite shore. For a long half-mile the wagons fought their way until they reached a place where lower banks allowed the river to spread into a wide and shallow expanse of water. There, Jo, riding ahead, saw Ben turn Selim suddenly about and plunge again into

the stream to test once more the safety of the ford. Her heart stood still as she watched him sink deeper and deeper with each succeeding step until the water reached his knees. Still the plucky horse kept on, with Ben guiding him this way and that, daring the danger of more quicksand in order to know what the bottom was like before attempting to bring the wagons over.

"Oh, Ben!" cried Jo, almost sobbing in her relief as he came riding up the bank to her side, "I thought surely you were drowned when you went under back there."

"Wasn't so sure I wasn't myself for a minute," said Ben, "but this place has a fair bottom and I'll take you over before the rest get here." He seized her bridle-rein. Jo curled up with fright.

"Oh, Ben," she gasped, "I'm scared!"

"Do it quick, just like taking a dose of medicine," said Ben; "the longer you think about it, the worse it will be." And without another word he led Topsy into the river.

In a few short but awful moments they reached the other side, and there Ben left her alone and went back once more to pilot the others across. Jo sat on Topsy's back, tense with dread as she saw the heavy wagons come lurching down the sloping bank on the other side and plunge into the stream. She was quick to see that it was much simpler for a horse and rider to cross than for a heavily loaded wagon, and she scarcely dared breathe as the mules and oxen strained to keep the wagon from sinking in the soft river mud. She listened to the commands of Paw Sanders as he urged on the mules and watched Ben as he rode beside the ox-team on Selim's back, and shouted encouragement to the struggling creatures. Once she shut her eyes as their wagon with Jim and Billy on the seat swayed drunkenly from side to side, then, apparently lifted by the current, seemed about to drift down stream. When she opened them again, the Sanders' mules were already gaining a foothold on the western

bank and their own team was only knee-deep in the water near the shore.

"Praise the Lord that's over and we're all here!" cried Maw, when the entire party stood once more on solid ground.

"Shucks, that wa'n't no great!" commented Grandmaw. "Down in Kentucky where I was raised there was floods that carried off houses and barns, let alone no end of folks."

Maw did not give a moment to dwelling on the past, but turned at once to the next business in hand. "Ben," she said, "you climb out of those wet clothes quicker than scat! Your teeth are chattering like a tin lid on a boiling kettle." She drove him into the shelter of the wagon and called further directions as he disappeared inside. "When you get your clothes off, rub yourself down till you're as red as a hot stove lid," she commanded; and from the depths of the wagon came Ben's voice, "I'm doing it, Maw."

When the little caravan was again ready

to move forward, Paw took a look at the sun. "Doggone it!" he said, "at this rate we'll get to California just about the same time as the millennium. It's ten o'clock already! Giddap!"

In spite of difficulties and delays they camped that night fifteen miles farther north.

"We'll follow up the east bank of the Missouri for a spell, before we try to get across it," said Paw, as they sat, after supper, about the camp-fire, studying the map and planning the next day's journey. "As I figure it, we'd have one less river to cross that way, and ferries cost a heap of money. Besides, this is mighty pretty country; the only thing against it is these pesky mosquitoes. They'd bite the head off of a boiler. I'm all spotted up with 'em."

"Shucks!" said Grandmaw, "you'd ought to see the skeeters down in Kentucky where I was raised. These here bugs can't hold a candle to 'em."

"Anyway, they're big enough to suit

me," grumbled Paw, slapping his forehead. "I was telling you, we ought to get a good crossing somewhere above the place where the Platte runs into the Missouri, and once we get on t'other side of the river, we strike the Oregon Trail. I'd rather keep to ourselves as long as we can, for I reckon we'll maybe have more company than we want, once we catch up with the emigrant trains."

"I calculate we'll maybe be thankful for all the company we can get," said Maw, "for I allow our troubles will just about begin when we get out on the plains."

"Right, right you are, Maw," said Paw, shaking his head solemnly; "what we've had to put up with so far is pie compared to what's coming!" He filled his pipe, pressed the tobacco down in the bowl with his thumb, lit it, and sat blowing clouds of smoke and staring into the fire long after Maw had sent the children to bed and had crawled in beside Grandmaw herself.

Ben lingered for a while to keep him company, then lay down beside Jim on his

bed of hay, under the stars. He was just dropping off to sleep when he was roused by a strange, weird howl that echoed across the prairie from a wood some little distance toward the east. Ginger instantly sprang to his feet with a low growl, and Topsy gave a frightened squeal and tugged at her tethering rope. Ben sat up to listen and saw Paw reach for his gun. "What's that?" he called softly.

"Just wolves, son," said Paw, "they won't come near the fire, but I reckon I'd better sit up a spell to keep it blazing, and watch the cattle. They're mean critters, wolves, and they might tackle the team. You sleep awhile now and I'll call you to go on watch by and by."

"Just as you say, Paw," said Ben, and, lying down again on the hay with his gun beside him, he tried his best to go to sleep, but an occasional howl from the woods kept him tense and listening. Ginger, too, was watchful. He padded softly about the wagons, with his ears cocked and his tail stiff, now

and then giving a low muttering growl. Ben watched his shadowy figure following Paw about in his rounds among the grazing cattle until at last he, too, fell asleep.

The early dawn was just graying the darkness of night when he felt a hand on his shoulder, and, waking from a deep sleep, saw a dark figure bending over him. For a moment he was frightened; then Paw's voice whispered, "It's just me, son! Take your gun and follow, and maybe we'll get that fellow. I judge he's prowling round the edge of that bunch of oaks over there and the wind's in our favor." In an instant Ben was as wide awake as if he had never been asleep in his life. He sprang to his feet, seized his gun, and, with Ginger at his heels, silently followed Paw beyond the circle of the camp-fire.

Slipping stealthily behind a little knoll that lay between them and the woods, they circled it and approached the trees from the farther side with Ginger running beside them, and excitedly snuffing about for the

trail. Silently, step by step, they crept toward the edge of the wood, trying to pierce the gloom of its shadows and find the enemy lurking there. They had reached the outskirts of the forest and were cautiously making their way from tree to tree, when suddenly Ginger leaped forward and tore through the underbrush like a bullet from a gun. Following him with their eyes, the two hunters saw the shadowy figure of the wolf showing dark between the trees against the lighter color of the open spaces. He had reached the edge of the prairie where the cattle were grazing and was crouching to spring on one of the oxen when Ginger burst from the underbrush with a howl of rage and hurled himself directly at him. Taken by surprise, the wolf wheeled in his tracks and leapt back into the woods. The instant he caught sight of him Ben raised his gun to fire.

"Don't shoot!" cried Paw, knocking up the barrel. "You'll kill the ox instead more'n likely. The two are right in line,

confound the luck!" The next instant they dared not shoot for other reasons. The dog and wolf were both hidden from sight in the shadows of the forest, and there was only the sound of breaking branches, and the violent movements of the underbrush to tell the hunters where they were. Ginger did not waste himself in barks, but pursued his foe in and out among the trees — the wolf doubling on his tracks as the dog was almost upon his flanks. Both Paw and Ben kept their guns raised, ready to fire, but neither dared shoot into the shrubbery, for fear of killing Ginger. It all happened in an instant of time, then the wolf broke loose and dashed out over the prairie toward the woods beyond, with Ginger leaping after him.

"Now! Now!" cried Paw, as the wolf tore past them.

Instantly two shots rang out on the still morning air, and the wolf fell dead not a hundred feet from where they stood. Lowering the muzzles of their guns, they ran to

the spot where he lay, but Ginger was there before them. He stood bristling and barking at his fallen foe, every line of his body tense with pride. There was no doubt in his mind that he had vanquished the enemy alone and unaided. He leaped to Ben's side and, looking up into his eyes, grinned the most self-satisfied grin that ever spread itself over a dog's face. Ben patted him. "Good old Ginger! brave dog!" he said, and Ginger wagged his tail nearly loose from its moorings in response. Then he proudly led the way back to camp, followed by Paw and Ben carrying the dead wolf between them.

The smell of coffee and bacon floating in appetizing gusts over the prairie told the tired hunters as they neared home that Maw had been quite aware of their departure and was preparing an extra good breakfast to cheer them after the labors of the night. The shots had roused all the other sleepers, and when Ginger trotted triumphantly into camp followed by the hunters with the game, a chorus of shouts and cheers greeted

their victorious return. They lingered after breakfast was eaten to skin the wolf and fasten the pelt to the canvas of the wagon; then the caravan again moved northward over the beautiful rolling prairies of Iowa.

VII

GRANDMAW ON GUARD

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GRANDMAW ON GUARD

For the next three days they moved steadily forward along the bluffs of the Missouri, and on the morning of the fourth came to a supply station kept by Mormon settlers at a place where Indians had often held their councils and which is still known as Council Bluffs.

Here they camped and made a thorough examination of their stores, for they were now on the very edge of the Great Plains and must be prepared to go for long distances over desert country where supply stations were few and far between. The stock of food was low in both wagons, and for the first time Ben, Jo, and Jim were forced to realize how little thought they had given to clothing in their preparations for the journey. Ben still had a modest supply,

but under stress of double demand Jim's overalls had reached a desperate condition. There were holes in every pair! They backed up to Maw as she was making a list of things that must be bought. "Look, Maw!" they said.

Maw looked and threw up her hands. "Land sakes alive!" she said, "is that all you've got?"

"The very last ones," sighed Jo.

"Well, I never!" was Maw's comment, "here's a howdydo!" She looked up at Ben, who was counting his money and studying the long list of things they must have before they dared set forth on the plains. "There are just no two ways about it," she said to him, "these young ones have got to have clothes or they'll soon be naked as the day they were born." The worried look deepened on Ben's face, but he only nodded in reply and put his list in his pocket, and he and Paw disappeared in the direction of the settlement, riding Topsy and Selim. Two hours later they returned, and the

Twins eagerly watched the bundles as they were unloaded from the packs, but no clothing appeared.

"I don't know anything about clothes," said Ben helplessly to Maw. "I wish you'd buy something for Jo and Jim."

"All right, son," said Maw. "I calculated

to do a little trading myself, and I'll take the children along while you and Paw finish bringing back the supplies."

"I dunno's I relish leaving the camp with just Grandmaw and Ginger to guard it," said Paw doubtfully. "The traders back there in the settlement tell me the Omahaws about here are a pretty poor lot of Indians. Some of 'em were loafing round the stores. I didn't cotton to 'em any, but I reckon Ginger would settle their hash if they came bothering round the camp."

"Huh," said Grandmaw scornfully, "I reckon I kin watch the camp as good as anybody. I ain't afeared. I been kind of broke to Injuns. There was a right smart sprinklin' of 'em down in Kentucky where I was raised. I used to be skeered they'd carry me off, but my maw allus said, 'Don't you be nowise consarned about that; once they git a good look at you they'd drop you for sartain.' She wa'n't one to turn your head with flattery, Maw wa'n't."

"Haw, haw!" roared Paw; "I reckon

you'd be a match for any of 'em I saw hanging about the settlement this morning, Grandmaw," and as there was no time to lose, he and Ben hurried back to the stores. Maw soon followed with the children, leaving Grandmaw to clear away the remains of the meal and pack the provisions.

When they reached the settlement, they found so many emigrants had passed through that there was nothing left in the way of clothing to suit their needs. They were turning away disappointed and perplexed, when Jim's eye caught sight of a pair of buckskin breeches on a pile of Indian blankets. "Maw," he cried, "why can't we wear Indian clothes?" There seemed nothing else to be done, and soon Jo and Jim were each the proud possessors of a pair of soft buckskin breeches with a row of fringe down the seams and a fringed buckskin shirt. Jim's boots were still whole, but Jo's shoes were badly worn, so her outfit was completed with a pair of moccasins trimmed with porcupine quills. These magnificent

purchases caused Billy frightful pangs of envy. He wished he had been less well provided for at the outset of the journey, so that he might now share in this splendor, and Maw, soft-hearted, spent a little of her meager store to comfort him by buying bows and arrows made by the Indians, for both the boys. With their purchases clasped in their arms, the trio returned to camp and found Paw and Ben just ahead of them, carrying in the last of their provisions. Grandmaw was placidly packing things away in the back of the Sanders wagon, and Ginger was sitting on his haunches by the fire looking pleased with himself.

"Well, Grandmaw," said Paw, dumping his heavy pack at her feet, "I see you're still here. Nobody carried you off while we were gone."

"No," answered Grandmaw; "not but what I had some attentions!"

"Grandmaw!" cried Maw, aghast. "You don't say!"

"Wal," said Grandmaw, "I ain't said yet,

but I aim to, if you give me a chance. Some of them pagans did come snoopin' round, but they didn't stay long after you all left. I was settin' here on this log to rest a spell and smoke my pipe, and Ginger was settin' over there by the supplies. My store teeth don't fit so awful well, and when I smoke I don't take no comfort with 'em, so I took out my uppers and put 'em down alongside of me on the log. I was just settin' there ruminatin', when Ginger gave a bark, and, lo and behold you, standing right there in front of me, was three of them heathen!"

"Grandmaw!" gasped Maw, "did they take anything?"

"Never teched a thing," said Grandmaw complacently. "I persuaded 'em not to, and Ginger he argued the p'int with 'em some too."

"Well, I'll be blowed!" exclaimed Paw. "Grandmaw, you beat the world. How did you do it?"

"'Twa'n't no trick," said Grandmaw; "when they come towards me I jest looked

at 'em cross-eyed and picked up my teeth and swallered 'em. Leastwise that's the way they figgered. You see, they don't have none of these modern improvements like store teeth. Then I scrabbled round in the air like I was puttin' a spell on 'em, and I says, real solemn, 'Iery, uery, ickery Ann; fillisy, follisy, Nicholas John,' like we used to count out down in Kentucky where I was raised. Wal, I reckon I must have done a right smart conjure trick on 'em, for the three of 'em lit out immejitly and to woncet, and the last I saw of 'em they was runnin' down that there bluff as if the dogs was after 'em."

"Grandmaw, you sure do beat all!" cried Paw, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. "I guess we don't need any guns when you're along."

"Shucks!" said Grandmaw, glancing at the sun, "git to work packin' away these supplies; it's three o'clock now, I reckon, and if we're goin' to cross this here river tonight, we'd better get movin'."

In half an hour they were again on their way and in the late afternoon they were ferried across the Missouri on a steamboat. This time no kind-hearted captain refused their passage money. Instead they were dismayed to find that the crossing cost $7.50 for each outfit. Ben looked more anxiously than ever at his tobacco-pouch as he put it back in his pocket after paying their fare, and even Paw appeared a little downcast. He lingered for a moment at the dock on the Nebraska side and looked back at the mighty current of the river that divided them so completely from the life they had hitherto known. "It does seem to me," he said to Ben, scratching his head in a puzzled way — "it does seem to me, as if this here map might have been laid out a sight better for our purposes. There's either too much water or not enough or none at all, all the enduring way."

Maw overheard him and leaned out of the wagon. "Like as not there was no thought of pleasing emigrants when the Lord laid it

out," she said crisply. "Anyway, I reckon we ain't likely to hatch anything settin' here. When you're stuck between the devil and the deep sea, you've got to make tracks for one or t'other, and I say let's light out for the sea double-quick."

Paw winked at Ben. "You can't beat my old woman!" he chuckled. "Right, right as a trivet every time, confound it," and, swinging himself to the wagon-seat beside Grandmaw, he gathered up the reins. "Giddap!" he shouted to the mules, and soon both teams were rattling over the logs of the dock and out upon the open prairies of Nebraska.

All the rest of the day they traveled steadily westward, and at sunset they came to a little knoll beside a running stream. Stretching on and on beyond it, as far as the eye could follow them, were ruts left in the soil of the plains by many, many wheels, and far away in the distance toward the south, gleaming red in the reflected glow of the sky, they traced the silver thread of a river.

Paw greeted the view with a burst of song.

"Here I raise my Ebenezer, Hither by thy help I come," he chanted, in the words of his favorite hymn. "That river is the Platte, and this is the Oregon Trail!"

VIII
THE OREGON TRAIL

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THE OREGON TRAIL

EARLY the next morning the creaking of many wheels and the voices of men shouting to their teams roused the drowsy emigrants, and in a few moments Jo, Jim, and Billy were standing beside the trail eagerly watching a single file of prairie schooners passing in what seemed an endless procession before them. There were mule-teams, and ox-teams, and even one-horse wagons moving eagerly forward in that strange company; and from the wagons all sorts of faces looked out at them, young and old, care-worn and care-free, adventurers all. The children waved their hands to other children as they passed, and Paw and Ben, who soon joined them, hailed the men with the free speech of the prairies and the trail. "Howdy, pardner. Good luck to you!

Where you bound for? Where do you hail from?" —the cheerful greetings passed back and forth.

"That's a likely bunch," said Paw to Maw when the last of the train had passed and the dust they had raised began to settle again. "I move we follow along after them, and maybe catch up with them for the night. We're getting into the Indian country now, and a lone outfit doesn't stand much show."

"Second the motion," said Ben.

"Carried," said Maw. "Get the teams ready while I scratch up something to eat." Breakfast was treated with scant attention, and before the wagon train had entirely disappeared in the distance, they had fallen into line and were following them in the well-worn ruts of the trail. Jo and Jim had put on for the first time their new buckskin suits, and Jo had bound a strip of red cotton, torn from the telegraph signal, about her head and had stuck a hawk's feather in the knot at the back. Browned by the sun

and on Topsy's back, she looked like a real Indian boy, and when she and Jimmy rode together, leading the way for the others, Billy, trundling along in the Sanders wagon behind them, nearly perished of envy.

All day long they kept in sight the cloud of dust of the emigrant caravan moving steadily before them, and in the late afternoon the Twins, riding some distance in advance of the others, saw the long train suddenly leave the trail and coil itself like a huge serpent in a circle on the open plain. Immediately men, women, and children, looking like a busy colony of ants, swarmed from the wagons. Harnesses were removed from the weary horses and mules, yokes were lifted from the necks of the oxen, and the beasts were turned out on the prairie to graze for a little while in freedom before they were hobbled for the night. Within a few moments a ring of fires glowed within the circle made by the wagons and the smell of many dinners cooking rose tantalizingly on the air.

Jimmy sniffed eagerly as they drew nearer to the camp. "Those smells hit me right where I live," he groaned, smiting his stomach. "Let's go back to the wagons and tell Ben and Paw to hurry up. If we want to join this party, we ought to make up to them before dark, and I'm hungry enough now to eat my boots!"

Jo turned in her saddle to look back over the trail. "I don't see our folks anywhere," she said. "We must have come pretty fast, or else something is the matter with them. Let's go see." She turned Topsy about, and they were just on the point of starting back over the trail when, without a moment's warning, a sudden panic seemed to strike the cattle belonging to the emigrant train. A pair of mules squealed, kicked up their heels, and started at a lively pace back toward the Missouri River, and, smitten by some strange contagion of fear, the other released animals left their browsing to run after them. The air was filled with strange brays and bellowings as the fright-

ened creatures rushed blindly out upon the trackless plains.

"A stampede! A stampede!" The frightened cry rose from the circle of camp-fires, and men, women, and children rushed wildly after the escaped cattle. To follow on foot and catch them seemed nearly as hopeless as trying to cage escaped birds. A tall, red-bearded man, seeing Jim and Jo mounted on their horses, waved his arms and shouted, "Head off those mules for the love of heaven!" The children obeyed instantly, and their horses, stirred also by the general panic, at once broke into a wild gallop and dashed away over the open plain. The fleeing mules were soon mere specks in the distance. Jo and Jim, urging Topsy and Selim to their topmost speed, followed hard after them and soon found themselves gaining a little in the pursuit.

On and on they flew over the trackless waste, turning as the two specks turned and trying always to cross their path and head them back toward the camp. Even

as they rode, they were conscious of the terrible importance of capturing the runaways, for they knew what being left alone in the desert with no way of escape might mean to the family of their owner, and this knowledge lent wings to their purpose. At last they were relieved to see the mules slacken their pace and finally stop altogether to graze on the scant herbage of the plains.

"Slow down, slow down," Jimmy called softly to Jo; "don't scare them," and, leaning sidewise from the saddle, Indian fashion, he came slowly up behind them and seized the halter of one of the mules. The moment he felt this restraining touch, the creature again broke away and ran toward a little hollow between two low-lying hills, his team-mate following hard after him.

"They're about tired out," said Jimmy; "we'll soon have them now," and, sliding from the saddle to the ground, he threw his bridle-rein to Jo, and, creeping quietly up beside them, at last succeeded in getting a

firm grasp of both halter-ropes. He did not at once attempt to turn them, but, letting the straps hang loose, gently guided the mules from one tuft of grass to another until their confidence was a little restored. At last he was able to turn one of the halter-ropes over to Jo, and, keeping a firm grip on the other, he swung himself into his saddle once more.

"We've got them!" he said in an exultant whisper, "and now let's get back to camp as fast as we can go!"

"My! but won't those folks be glad to see their mules again!" cried Jo. She turned Topsy about and eagerly scanned the great plains billowing away in low hills and hollows in all directions, to get her bearings. She swept the whole circle of the horizon, but not a single sign of life greeted her eye. "Wh-which way *is* camp?" she gasped, turning pale.

Jim, who had been examining his saddle-girth, looked up at her in surprise.

"Why, right over that way, of course,"

he said, raising his finger confidently to point to it, but his hand dropped again to his side, and his eyes opened wide with astonishment and dismay. There was no camp in sight! "It *must* be over that way," he cried, "for that's west. You can see the sunset colors still in the sky!"

"Yes," faltered Jo, "but I don't see any camp-fires or any wagons or anything." Jim stood up in his stirrups and he too scanned the wide landscape and saw nothing but the endless plains, stretching away to the very edge of the sky. There was not a sound to break the stillness nor a sign of life anywhere. He sank again to the saddle and the two looked at each other in blank dismay; then Jimmy gave a tug to his halter-rope. "Well, Maw would say we won't ever find it sitting here, that's sure," he said, and, clucking to Selim, he started bravely toward the afterglow, already fading from the sky. For some minutes they plodded along, glancing over their shoulders from time to time, fearing to see In-

dians and hoping to see the gleam of campfires; but neither appeared.

A jack-rabbit leaped from the shelter of a sage-bush and startled them. Darkness deepened about them, the moon rose like a great silver wheel in the sky, and the wide landscape took on a gray, ghostly look; but still no welcoming glow of fires gladdened their eyes. Hungry, thirsty, tired, frightened, they at last stopped.

"We're just as lost as we can be," sobbed Jo. "Oh, why did we ever start on this terrible journey? We shall die in the desert, or else the Indians will get us!"

Jim gulped back a lump in his own throat. "Anyway, we *said* we'd rather be caught by the Indians than stay with Aunt Maria," he managed to whisper.

"Oh," sobbed Jo, "I wish I'd never said it! I didn't mean it! I didn't mean it! Oh, Mother, Mother!" She bent low over Topsy's neck and gave herself up to a gust of tears.

Jim sat helplessly in his saddle and

looked up at the sky. "Sis," he said, after a moment, "do you suppose God's up there looking down at us? Do you think he'd listen if we prayed?"

"I don't know," Jo faltered. "We might try."

"I can't think of any prayer, except 'Now I lay me,'" said Jim, "and we can't say, 'Now I lay me,' when here we are, sitting bolt upright in these saddles, and we've got to stick in them just the same, prayer or no prayer, 'cause we mustn't let go of the mules or the horses, either one."

Jo tied her halter to the pommel of her saddle, shut her eyes, and clasped her hands. "O God," she whispered, "excuse us from kneeling down, for Thou seest we've got to hang on to these mules." Then she turned to Jim, "Maybe God won't care, and we can say 'Our Father,' anyway," she said, and the two voices murmured in unison the prayer that has comforted the world for two thousand years.

"That part about 'delivering us from evil' ought to be all right," said Jim, "so let's have another try for the camp." Filled with fresh hope, they climbed to the top of a near-by rise of ground and again scanned the horizon. Still no sign of the camp. "There's just nothing to do but keep going," said Jim, and for some time they moved forward in silence; then suddenly they came to what appeared to be a great slanting wall of earth stretching directly across their way. "We didn't come down any such slope as that," said Jim, gazing up at it, "but if we can get the mules to go up, we can see ever so much farther from the top." Then suddenly they heard a dog bark, and the faint, far-away sound of voices.

"They're looking for us!" gasped Jo, her voice trembling and tears of relief rushing to her eyes. "I thought Ginger would find us! Let's hurry!" She urged Topsy forward. "They must be quite near; maybe the camp is right on top of this hill," she

cried, and, dragging the mule after her, she stumbled eagerly up the steep ascent. Jim followed. The sound of voices grew louder as they climbed, then suddenly they came over the sharp brow of the cliff and found themselves not two hundred feet from a camp, truly enough, but it was a camp of Indians! For an instant they stood still on the brink, fully revealed in the moonlight, too frightened to move. They saw a stir in the camp. Sharp cries rose, more dogs barked, and then three savages started on the run toward them and others ran to mount their ponies, which were grazing beyond the camp. The frightened children felt the frightened horses tremble under them; then without an instant's warning the mules uttered the same wild cry they had given when they first started from the camp, and, wheeling about in their tracks, plunged down the steep incline, dragging the children and the horses after them.

That they reached the bottom without being thrown was little short of a miracle.

Fear seemed to wing the feet of the flying creatures as they leaped downward, and the children clung to the necks of the horses like limpets to a rock. To keep hold of the halter-ropes was impossible, and they would have lost the mules entirely if the herd instinct had not kept them and the horses together. As it was, it seemed as if they reached the bottom of the slope almost at a bound, and went skimming away over the plains like flying birds. They could not have looked back if they had tried, but they heard yells behind them, and from the brow of the cliff a shower of singing arrows fell about them. Clinging desperately to their horses' manes, on and on they sped until the voices died away in the distance and once more they were swallowed up in the gray stillness of the plains.

They must have gone two miles or more in their wild flight, when the exhausted creatures slackened pace and Jo and Jim were able to sit up in the saddle once more. Trembling with fright and fatigue, the ter-

rified mules finally came to a standstill, Topsy and Selim stopped, panting, beside them, and the children were able to look about them once more. There was nothing to be seen but miles of open country. If the Indians had attempted to follow them, they were now left far behind. For a little time they stood still and listened. No sound but the panting of the breathless animals and the distant bark of coyotes greeted their ears.

Jim slid down out of the saddle; Jo followed his example and the two stood still holding fast to the reins of their horses and the halters of the mules.

"They can't go any farther until they are rested, no matter what happens," said Jim at last. "They're ready to drop in their tracks."

"So am I," sighed Jo. She sank to the ground. "I'm tired enough to die and I don't care if I do!"

"Oh, yes, you do," said Jimmy bravely. "I'll hold the horses, and you rest a little; then you can spell me."

Jo was too exhausted to protest and,

stretching out on the ground, pillowed her head on her arm. There was no way of tethering the animals, so Jimmy stood still holding the reins and halter-ropes in his hands, a forlorn little hitching-post in the midst of a boundless waste. He stood until he could stand no longer, then Jo took his place. The moon climbed higher and higher in the sky; they were suffering from thirst even more than from hunger, and the creatures suffered even more than they, but no relief appeared.

They had waited for what seemed almost forever when from far in the distance came the crack of a rifle.

"Oh!" cried Jimmy, starting to his feet, "maybe they're hunting for us!" He put his hands to his mouth and was just about to send a call shrilling over the plains, when Jo stopped him.

"Don't," she cried; "it will tell the Indians just where we are! Besides, it may have been Indians who fired the gun! We don't know!"

Jimmy sank back on the ground, and they listened so intently they could almost hear the grass growing under their feet. Soon another shot came, and another.

"They're getting nearer," shuddered Jo; "maybe the Indians have attacked the camp!"

"It can't be that," said Jim, "there'd be more shots. Let's get up in the saddles again." Still keeping hold of the halters, the two children mounted once more and waited. More shots, and now they saw the flash from a rifle! "I do believe they are looking for us!" whispered Jim; "I'm going to call. I'd just as soon be taken by Indians as die in the desert, anyway." He put his hands again to his lips and sent a long "Halloo" ringing over the desert spaces. They held their breaths and listened. Far in the distance they were answered by a faint "Halloo" and the barking of a dog.

"If only we had a lantern or a torch," cried Jim, urging Selim forward, "we could make them see us! Let's move, anyway.

It's easier to see something moving! If we stay still, they might take us for bushes or rocks."

They moved slowly in the direction of the sounds, shouting and listening by turns. The answering shouts grew louder and the barking more and more distinct.

"It's Ginger; I know it's Ginger!" cried Jo.

Soon they could see a dark figure bounding toward them through the low bushes of the plains, and in another moment there was Ginger, beside himself with joy, leaping up to their stirrups to kiss their feet!

"Ginger! Ginger! Where are they?" gasped Jim, as he slid once more to earth and clasped the dog in his arms. "Good dog, good old Ginger, go find Ben!" he urged.

Ginger, pricking up his ears and looking very important, immediately ran forward a little way, stopped and looked back to see Jim remount and be sure they were following him, then ran on again, and again

stopped, until the children were nearly caught up with him, then on he ran again.

"Ginger knows the way! Go on! Good dog!" cried Jo, and Ginger obediently trotted forward. The calls continued and grew louder, but still they could see no one; then they heard their names, "Jo! Jim!" It was Ben's voice!

"Here! Here!" they shouted, and, urging forward their tired horses, they rounded a little knoll, and there, coming straight toward them out of the gray darkness, they saw Ben and Paw Sanders!

"By jolly, the little roosters have brought back the mules!" bellowed Paw in a voice that could be heard a mile away.

"Of course! That's what they went for!" Ben answered proudly, and, just because he was so glad to see them, his voice was gruff to hide its trembling. He pointed his rifle up in the air and fired six shots, one right after the other.

"Why do you do that?" cried Jo, amazed.

"To tell the camp you're safe. One shot

apiece for you and the mules and horses. Ten men are out scouring the plains to find you, and if you hadn't brought back the mules they'd keep on hunting," answered Ben. "They'll hear the six shots, too, and come back to camp."

"Did they catch the rest of the cattle?" asked Jim.

"All in but you and the mules," said Paw; "and now let's hurry back; it isn't far to go."

They turned into the trail, Paw and Ben leading the mules, followed by the Twins on horseback and led by Ginger capering joyfully before them. Maw and Grandmaw, who with Billy had been anxiously watching for their return, saw them first, coming up the trail in the moonlight, and Billy's shout of "Here they come!" brought the whole camp swarming out to meet them. It was a proud moment when they rode up to the circle of wagons leading the lost mules and were greeted by shouts and cheers from the assembled campers. They had gone away strangers; they came back to a large

circle of friends. The red-bearded man himself lifted the weary children from their weary horses, and took charge of the mules, while all the rest of the people followed Jo and Jim to the place made for their teams in the circle of wagons and watched them as they ate the supper that Maw prepared for them. Soon the men that had been out searching the plains for the lost children came straggling into camp and gathered with the others about Maw's camp-fire to question them about their adventure. The red-bearded man came back from feeding and hobbling the mules and joined the group.

"That's queer," he said when Jim told about the Indian village and the shower of arrows; "this is the Pawnee Country and I was told the Pawnees were friendly."

"I allow mebbe they're too friendly," said another. "They're so partial to us, seems like nothin' will do but they must drive off our cattle to remember us by! It's my opinion some of them red varmints started that

'ere stampede. There wa'n't nothin' else to skeer them mules. They could have shot an arrow from behind the rocks yonder and started the whole doggoned rumpus without our seein' them at all."

"That's more'n likely," said the red-bearded man, "for there's blood on the neck of one of my mules."

"Ye can't prove nothin' by that," said another; "the critter might have been hit when they let fly the arrows after these here boys, or he might have run into something and got scratched."

The red-bearded man considered this theory. "Mebbe so," he said, "or it might be when the boys" (here Jo blushed and looked down at her plate, and Billy and Jim giggled) — "it might be when the boys showed up so sudden-like, right by their camp, dressed up in Indian clothes that way, that the Pawnees thought some unfriendly tribe was spyin' on 'em. The boys didn't stay long enough for 'em to sense they wa'n't nothin' but boys! Things allus looks bigger by

moonlight, anyway. I reckon mebbe the little roosters plumb skeered them."

"More'n likely," commented Grandmaw. "Sometimes Injuns is awful easy scairt."

"Haw, haw!" roared Paw, slapping his knee. "Grandmaw can tell you how to manage 'em! She was fetched up with 'em down in Kentucky. We'd ought to send Grandmaw after 'em. She could stampede their whole village, sure as guns," and he related to the delighted circle the story of Grandmaw's encounter at the settlement.

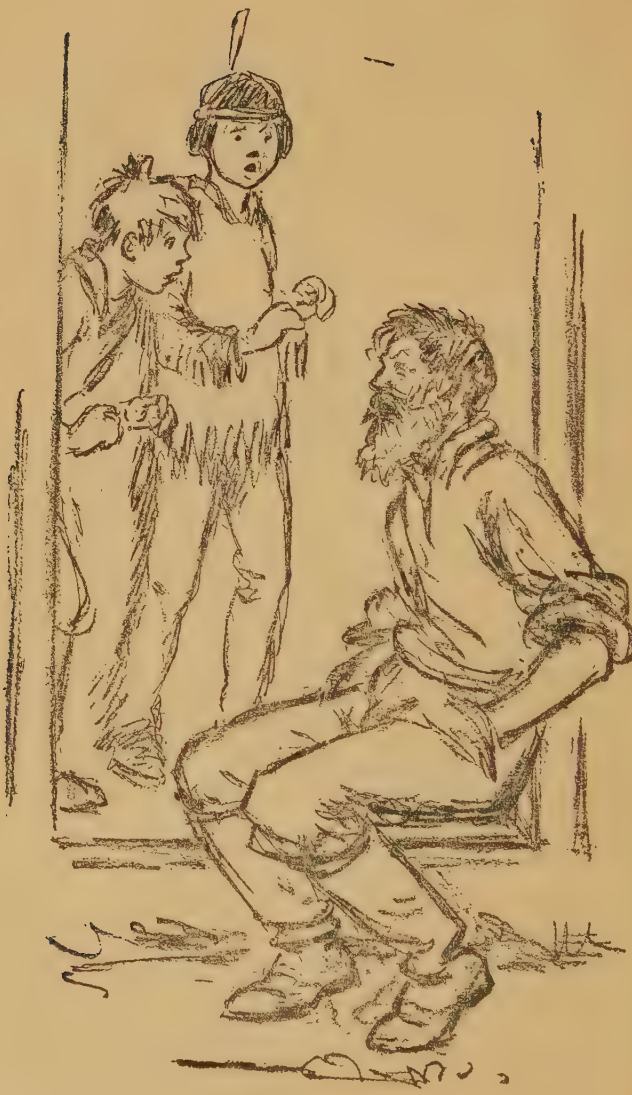
This story led to others, and a group lingered about the fire long after Maw had sent the children to bed. The last that Jo remembered, as she trailed off to sleep on her hay bed, was hearing the red-bearded man say to Paw: "Well, stranger, thanks to them two plucky little fellows of your'n, we got our critters all safe to-night, and I reckon we'll have to take turns watchin' 'em after this, every night, till we get out of this God-forsaken wilderness. Me and my pardner will take turns on guard to-night and you needn't feel

a mite consarned. We'll look out for your beasts same as if they was our own."

Paw replied: "Our dog'll help you. He's got more sense than some Christians." And, leaving Ginger with his new friends, he lay down beside Billy in their little tent.

IX

ON AND ON



IX

ON AND ON

From the time they joined the emigrant train the journey became easier in one way and much, much harder in others. They had found friends whose help could be relied upon, and whose companionship increased the chances of safety in passing through regions where unfriendly Indians made each day a fresh peril. On the other hand, their discomforts greatly increased. The dust became nearly unbearable. The heat grew steadily fiercer as summer advanced. Food, water, and fuel all became more scarce, and what water they could get was so bad that many of the wagons were laden with sick people. They were beset by other dangers in crossing the rivers that lay across their path, and at night they were never free from the menace of hostile tribes of Indians.

Once they came upon the hideous record

of an Indian raid that had ended in massacre, and all the way, every day, their route was lined with the whitening bones of dead cattle and the shallow graves of emigrants — men, women, and children — who had perished on the trail. As they advanced farther and farther over the dry and dusty plains, vegetation almost ceased, and for many weeks they saw no growing thing but sage-brush, and the strange, grotesque shapes of cacti that seemed writhing in endless torment.

"It looks like the corpse of a country that died in a fit," was Maw's comment on the scenery, and Jo called it "the land of bad dreams." Jim and Billy found some distraction in hunting snakes with their bows and arrows near the camp-sites, and were never tired of watching the little prairie-dogs dodging in and out of their holes. Sometimes they had glimpses of bigger game. There were wolves in the region and herds of wandering buffalo, and once they saw antelopes. For the most part, however, the

barren waste was shunned by all living things. It was beautiful with a strange, weird, terrible beauty which in the midst of so much suffering made no appeal to the weary travelers. When she could bear it no longer, Jo sometimes sought refuge in the shelter of the wagon, leaving Billy to ride Topsy if he chose. Billy usually did choose, and rode until his face was brown as an Indian's under a thatch of tow hair bleached almost white by the sun.

Each day their supply of food steadily dwindled, and by the time they reached the Mormon settlement of Salt Lake City, between the beautiful blue Wasatch Mountains and the Great Salt Lake, their stores were nearly gone, and the old tobacco-pouch was nearly empty of money with which to buy more. There were trading stations here filled with everything needed by emigrants, and here Ben was obliged to sell Topsy and Selim in order to buy food for the rest of their journey.

It was a hard, hard day when they said

good-bye to their faithful horses and, leaving the green irrigated plain of the Mormon settlement behind them, set forth with renewed dread over the burning alkali deserts that lay beyond. Here the brave Ginger almost gave out, and for a time they feared they must leave his bones to whiten beside the trail, but he kept pluckily on, walking under the wagon, over the scorching desert, or riding in it with Jim and Jo, while Ben, to lighten the load, plodded beside them through biting white dust as deep as drifted snow. Overborne by dreadful days and sleepless nights, Paw grew less jovial, Maw's voice lost its accustomed cheerfulness, and even Grandmaw had nothing worse to offer from Kentucky by way of encouragement. Stout-hearted Ben grew visibly thinner, and Jo, sitting in the wagon with nothing to do, thought often and longingly of the little log house on the Illinois prairies. Even Aunt Maria's stern visage was softened in her homesick memory.

She was now oppressed with a new ter-

ror. They had started out with complete assurance that they had only to find the camp from which their father's letter had been written to find him, and that their troubles would then be over. Now, from many stories that she had heard about the camp-fires on the trail, Jo knew that disappointed miners often wandered from one place to another seeking fresh diggings in the hope of better luck. She knew, too, that her father when last heard from had not yet been satisfied with his prospects. Suppose he had left the Bouncing Bet Diggings, leaving no trace? How could they ever find him? And if they never should find him at all, what would become of them? Their money was almost gone. They had no means of earning more. These and many like thoughts haunted her. She said nothing of these fears to Ben or Jimmy, but one day, as she rode for a time in the Sanders wagon, she confided her trouble to Grandmaw, and Grandmaw rallied her own waning courage to comfort her.

"Land sakes alive, honey!" she said, "ain't you got troubles enough already in hand without huntin' round for more in the bush? The supply ain't no wise scanted, far's I can see. You'll find plenty waitin' for you all along the way if you look for 'em, but if I was you I'd jest tend right up to these here alkali miseries and leave the others be till you ketch up with 'em. Like as not when you ketch up with 'em you'll find they ain't there!"

She smiled a toothless but cheerful smile, —having as usual discarded her "store teeth" for greater comfort,—and laid her gnarled hand soothingly on the dark head beside her. "It's up hill all the way, I reckon," she said gently, "leastwise I ain't found no land flowin' with milk and honey yet in my pilgrimage, but it's kind of interestin' to see what's goin' to happen next, and the Lord generally eases up on one misery before ol' man trouble comes knockin' at the door again."

They had been five long weary months

on the way when at last one memorable day the caravan reached the fork where the California trail branched off from the Oregon. Here they said good-bye to many of their friends of the wagon train, and, turning westward, followed the trail for days across more desert areas, until they reached a pass in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. After traveling a thousand treeless miles they now found themselves surrounded by magnificent pine forests and could feast their eyes on range after range of snow-capped peaks. It was a great relief from the scorching sun of the plains, and they needed all the refreshment they could get, for they were still a long distance from their goal, and the way to it lay over almost impassable mountain roads.

September had come, and the nights, cold with the first touch of autumn, were made colder still by the winds blowing from the perpetual snow-fields on the mountain-tops. The emigrants shivered in their beds at night, and the fires for cooking their food became necessary for warmth also. There

was clear water now in plenty, and each night they camped beside some spring or rushing mountain stream. There were trout in the streams, and whenever there was a chance, Billy and Jim rushed at once to try their luck at fishing. Sometimes they even caught something. These were great events, and the possibility of fresh food gave a new zest to life.

One evening, as they were making camp well up in a mountain pass, at some little distance in advance of the rest of the train, Jimmy came rushing back to Ben breathless with excitement.

"There are some queer tracks down there by a spring!" he gasped. "Billy and I found them when we were picking up pine-cones for the fire! They look like a giant's foot. Hurry like everything!"

Ben immediately left the oxen standing with the yoke still on, and ran with Jimmy to the spring, followed by all the rest of the family. Grandmaw, a little winded but game, came up last of all and craned her neck over

Ben's shoulder to see the strange imprint in the mud.

"Shucks!" she said, "'tain't nothin' else but a b'ar. In Kentucky, where I was raised, they used to come around frequent, and we

had b'ar's meat till we was sick of it. We used to put the butter in a tin bucket down in the spring to keep cool, and once I went to git it, and there I see a b'ar sitting up on his haunches just like a Christian, and he had the kiver off that bucket and he was dippin' his paw in and lappin' up the butter like it was honey out of a bee-tree. When he see me, he was scairt, but he never slackened up on the butter. He just growled and kept on lappin'."

"What did you do, Grandmaw," asked Jo.

"Why, first off, I ran," said Grandmaw; "I was mad's a hornet; there wa'n't no men about, so I just slipped back to the cabin and got a rifle and come back and made fresh meat of him. I'd relish settin' up to a good chunk of b'ar's meat again. I reckon mebbe you could ketch this feller; the tracks ain't been there long." This was the first time in many days that Grandmaw had thought of anything from Kentucky to cheer them, and, fired with fresh enthusiasm, Ben

and Paw forgot their weariness, got their guns, and at once set forth to follow the bear tracks, leaving the work of the camp to Maw and the children. Jim and Billy got their bows and arrows and begged to go, too, but Maw was firm.

"I didn't ever raise you to feed you to the bears," she said discouragingly to Billy. "You and Jim rastle up a right smart bit of fuel now, so we can have a fire and cook a steak when they git back — always providin' they git one."

Lured by this prospect, the boys and Jo gathered a wonderful heap of pine-cones, swept a flat rock bare of needles, and made a fire, which they fed with fresh cones until the top of the rock was one mass of glowing coals. Maw made some of her best corn-bread and cooked it before the fire on a flat board that she kept for the purpose, and every moment they all listened for the crack of a rifle. At last, far in the distance, they heard a shot, then another, and after that all was still.

"Reckon they got him," said Grandmaw; "if they didn't, more'n likely there'll be more shots."

They piled the fire high and waited and waited, until at last, when they were so hungry it seemed they could wait no longer, Paw and Ben appeared, carrying a great chunk of bear's meat between them!

The children never forgot that night—the leaping flames lighting up the trunks of the majestic trees, the deep blue of the sky above, the tops of the pines with the stars hanging like jewels among the swaying branches. In after years they could still vividly recall the smell of the broiling steak and could see the glow on Maw's kindly face as she bent over the fire to turn it; and how could they ever forget the moment when they tasted the first fresh meat they had seen in three long months?

The entire train feasted next day on the remainder of the meat, and the pelt was added to the wolfskin still reposing on top of the covered wagon. There followed

more days of struggling up endless hills over almost impassable roads, of following perilous trails along the edges of cliffs, and plunging down steep slopes where a misstep might end their journeying forever. They passed through pine forests that covered the whole sides of mountains, each step unfolding before their prairie-fed eyes such new panoramas of strange beauty that they felt they almost walked a different earth. Strength and exhilaration came with each new view of the everlasting hills, and when they stood in the deep gloom of a forest and gazed up at the sky through giant trees, Jo said to Jim in an awed whisper, "Jimmy, I don't believe even heaven, where Mother is, could be beautifuller than this place."

By almost impassable trails the travelers struggled over three ranges of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and came at last to a narrow valley through which a clear, swiftly flowing stream wound its crooked way. Each day their excitement increased as

they saw miners actually at work panning gold from the beds of streams and passed the rough camps of log houses and tents where they lived. The valley was dotted all the way with little groups of men wielding pickaxes or standing in the water shaking pans of gravel and eagerly scanning the contents to find the grains of yellow dust for which they had left homes and families and risked death a thousand times.

Following the creek, they came at last to its junction with a broader stream, and here Ben left the two outfits on the trail while he went to ask its name of a prospector who was staking out a claim. He learned from him that they were standing on the banks of the American River, the very river on which were located the "Bouncing Bet Diggings," and that the camp itself was only a few miles farther down stream. Ben came leaping back to the wagons with this news.

"Oh!" cried Jo, "I can't wait! We must find Father before we sleep to-night!" And, jumping to the ground, she ran ahead

of the teams down the trail, followed at full speed by Jim and Ginger.

"Leave 'em go," said Maw to Billy, laying a restraining hand on his collar as he made a move to join them. "It might be they'll run right into their paw, and they won't need you for a minute or two then. You stay along with us."

Billy yielded sulkily and kicked his heels on the back of the wagon for at least a mile to ease his feelings. Ben was as eager and impatient to reach the goal of their long journey as the Twins, but he had to stay by the team and guide the oxen safely down the rough and dangerous road, even though his heart outran his boots.

On and on the two eager little figures sped, and soon the creaking wagons were left far behind, and they were alone in the beautiful valley except for an occasional miner who glanced up at them in surprise as they passed.

"We must look hard at every one we see," panted Jo, stopping for breath at the

opening of a little cañon where three men were at work. "It would be dreadful to pass Father right by without knowing it."

"Are you sure you'd know him if you saw him?" asked Jimmy. "I can't just remember how he looks."

"I can," said Jo confidently; "he has twinkly blue eyes and thick dark hair, and he isn't all stooped and shaggy, with a beard like an old goat! His face is smooth."

"It's an awful long time since we saw him," sighed Jimmy. "Maybe he looks different now!"

"Anyway," said Jo, scanning the three miners in the cañon, "none of those men look a bit like him, for one of them has yellow hair, one has red, and the other one is bald! Let's go on." They trotted on for a few moments in silence, then Jo said: "Anyway, even if we shouldn't know him, he'll be certain sure to know us! My, but won't he be surprised!"

She gave a little skip of joy at the thought of that happy meeting, but Jimmy's face

clouded over. He looked at Jo's shorn head with its upstanding feather and at her buckskin breeches, and was seized by a new qualm.

"But we don't look like us!" he declared.

"Anyway, you don't! You don't look a bit as you did when we left home. You look like a homely little Indian boy. I wouldn't know you myself if I hadn't been with you all the time."

Jo's old terror suddenly returned upon her. "Oh, Jimmy!" she cried, clutching the fringe of his sleeve, "s'pose we shouldn't know him, and he shouldn't know us! S'pose he'd just think we're two little Indian boys! S'pose we can't find him at all! S'pose he's gone away! S'pose he's dead!"

"Now, just you lay off s'posin' like that," cried Jimmy indignantly. "S'pose we do find him! S'pose he's dug up a whole pile of gold! Why can't you s'pose that way once in a while?"

Jo made no reply, for just then they saw two men coming toward them carrying picks on their shoulders.

"We can ask every single man we meet if he knows Father, anyway," said Jo; "then we shan't pass him by on the road."

The men were now quite near them, and

the children gazed eagerly at the sunburned faces as they approached, but no spark of recognition passed between them. There were only curious glances, the usual hearty greetings of the trail, and a short "No, we've just come here ourselves" in answer to their question, and the children hurried on.

A little farther down the valley they came upon a tiny log cabin standing by itself against the rocky slope of the cliff that rose above the river-bank. The door stood open, but there was no one in sight.

"Let's knock politely," said Jo, "and if the man's anywhere about he'll hear us and we'll ask him if he knows Father."

With fast-beating hearts they approached and peeped in at the open door. There was little to be seen in the room but a rough table with a coffee-pot and some dirty dishes standing on it, a hay bed in the corner, and a few garments hanging from wooden pegs on the wall. No one appeared in answer to their timid knock, and they lingered a moment at the threshold.

"It's so long since I've been in a house I do want to go in," sighed Jo.

"Come on," said Jimmy boldly; "it won't do a bit of harm. We won't touch anything."

Jo timidly followed him through the open door and immediately looked behind it to be sure nothing was waiting there to jump out at them. She turned to Jimmy, who was surveying the table with his hands in his pockets. "That's gold, I bet," he said, nodding at a tin can half filled with yellow gravel standing among the soiled dishes. They gazed down at it reverently.

"Don't you touch it, Jimmy," said Jo piously; "remember God's eye is in every place and He wouldn't want to see you meddle with things that don't belong to you!"

"Who's a-meddling?" said Jimmy irritably; "haven't I got my hands in my pockets?"

Jo ignored the question.

"Oh!" she cried, gazing about the room, "I bet Father has a cabin just like this!

S'pose it should be this very one! How I'd like to fix it up for him! I wish we knew who lives here!"

"I do," said a gruff voice right behind them!

Jo jumped nearly out of her skin, and Jim almost fell over Ginger as they whirled about and faced a six-foot giant, more hairy and rough than any man they had yet seen. There was surprise, suspicion, and amusement in his face as he stood in the door, barring their way, and looked at the two children. Ginger dodged between Jimmy's legs and planted himself valiantly before them.

"Where in creation do you two little roosters hail from?" demanded the man, "and what are you doing here?"

Jo's knees shook beneath her. "We're twins and we are just looking for our father!" she stammered.

"Expect to find him in the coffee-pot?" inquired the man. "Where'd you lose him, huh?"

"Oh," cried Jo, finding explanations difficult, "he's somewhere out here, and we don't know where! We've just come, and he's been here a year. He was in the Bouncing Bet Diggings when he wrote us last, but that was a long time ago. I was just kind of pretending that maybe this was his cabin!"

Jimmy now felt a sudden burst of inspiration. He gazed up at the man's blue eyes, which were certainly twinkly, and at his dark thick hair.

"Maybe — perhaps — you aren't our father, are you?" he gasped. "When he went away, he hadn't any hair on his face, but maybe he looks just as bad as you do now, and we'd never know him!" Jo, horrified, gave Jim a punch and frowned, and Jimmy, bewildered and surprised, punched back. "What are you punching me for?" he demanded.

The man looked at the pair and, suddenly doubling up with laughter, he sat down on the doorsill. "No," he gasped at last, wip-

ing his eyes, "'ang it all, I aren't your pa, but may I be everlastingly toasted if I don't wish I was! What's your pa's name?"

"Hiram Miller," said Jo. She looked anxiously at the door, wishing they could get out of it, but the man sat all across it and they were penned inside.

"'Iram Miller!" he exclaimed. "You don't mean to tell me you're his young 'uns? Looky 'ere. You can't fool me. I know 'Iram well, and he's just about talked me to death tellin' about his little twin girl and boy, and here come you two boys claimin' to belong to him!" He looked at them sternly. "Don't try to put up any gimes on a trustin' hinnocent Henglishman who's come out to these here precipitous parts to better his fortune. It ain't right!" he said; "'ow do Hi know you ain't two desperadoes plannin' to leave yourselves on my doorstep and lookin' to hadopt me, hey? Tell me that!"

Jo turned very red. "If you please, sir," she said, "I'm a girl, but my clothes wore

out and we couldn't get any others and Maw said—" Then she broke off explanations, "Oh, won't you please tell us where Father is? He doesn't know we're coming, and we want to find him to-night if we can!"

"It's onpossible, dearie," said the man. "It's all but sundown now, and it'll soon be as dark as a stack of black cats." He pointed to the eastern cliffs and the tops of the trees touched with the golden light of the setting sun. "Night comes down sudden in these 'ere valleys," he said. "Where's your folks? You aren't travelin' by yourselves?"

"No, no!" cried Jo impatiently; "they're coming in wagons! They'll soon be here! Tell us where he is; we'll hurry like everything and maybe we can find him before dark."

The man shook his head, and his twinkly blue eyes became suddenly grave. "I 'ate to tell you," he said, "but your pa left these 'ere parts two days ago!" 'E hadn't made 'is pile, and 'e said 'e was sick of livin' away

from 'is folks, anyway, and 'e was goin' 'ome to the farm!"

Aghast at this dreadful news, Jo sank to the floor beside Ginger, and Jim stood still stunned by the blow.

"Oh, come," coaxed the man, "you mustn't give in now! You can't go any farther till your folks catch up with you, anyway, so make yourselves to 'ome. You don't want your maw to find you cryin' when she comes along."

"Our mother didn't come with us; she's dead," said Jimmy; and then, with a sob, "Father doesn't know it."

The man whistled. "Well, that's a bad job for certain," he said. "I thought you said your ma —"

"That's Maw Sanders; we came with them," explained Jo.

"There they are now," said the man, looking up the road, and there, to be sure, were the wagons, rumbling slowly down along the rocky ravine. Ben and Paw were walking beside the teams, while Maw and Billy

strode on ahead of them, looking eagerly about for the children. "A petticoat! A calico skirt, as sure as you're born, and a woman inside of it!" exclaimed the man, gazing at Maw. "If that ain't a sight for sore eyes! There ain't been a woman in these 'ere precipitous parts sence —"

The children heard no more; they had already dashed past him and were running up the trail to meet the teams. The man hesitated a moment, then strode after them. Paw, seeing the children coming and that they had news to tell, and judging by their faces that it was not good news, turned the reins over to Grandmaw and hurried to join Maw and Billy. Ben left the ox-team standing in the road and came with him.

"He's gone!" cried Jimmy as they met. "He's gone home! Two days ago!" The blow stunned them all. They were standing still, dumb with distress, when their new friend reached them.

"Axin' your parding, ma'am," he said, bobbing his head to Maw and pulling his

forelock, "my name's Tompkins, and hif there's hanything Hi kin do fer you, dummit, ma'am, doin' hit won't be nothin' else but a treat!"

"Thank you kindly, sir," said Paw, and shook him warmly by the hand. He made short work of introducing the others and explaining their difficulties.

The man listened attentively. "Hi'm bound to tell you, hit's just onpossible to go down this trail with the teams after dark," he said, "but you stop by my cabin. Hi'll do my dumbdest to circumwent this here sitiwation. You can camp right alongside of me and cook your supper, and if it gets out that there's a woman in your outfit there ain't a man in the valley that wouldn't run a mile jest to get a squint at her, axin' your parding, ma'am, but that's the fact! You couldn't keep 'em off with a gun. And more'n likely there'll be some of 'em that'll know more about Miller than what I kin tell you."

Maw rose to the situation. "You tell 'em,"

she said, "that there's *two* women and that one of 'em is the best flapjack-maker in Illinois; that's Grandmaw. Give us an extra fryin'-pan, and between the two of us and the flapjacks we'll soon find out all there is to know about Hiram Miller. If he went only two days ago on foot, we can ketch up with him, since we kin start on before daylight in the mornin'. I ain't downhearted!"

"That's Maw all over!" said Paw admiringly. "You can't beat my old woman. She's right, right as a trivet every time!"

Paw's encomium fell upon deaf ears. Mr. Tompkins's attention was riveted on the subject of flapjacks!

"Certain sure, ma'am, I've got a fryin'-pan," he said; "and what's more I've got 'alf a keg of sorghum molasses!" And without another word he strode back toward his cabin as if he were going to a fire!

Maw hastened back to the wagon to break the news to Grandmaw, Paw and Ben returned to their teams, and the three children, their hopes revived by Maw's courage and

resourcefulness, followed their new-found friend back to his cabin. They were no longer afraid of him, and in the short interval before the wagons turned in beside the trail, they eagerly helped him set his little toy cabin to rights and get ready for company. Jo washed the few dishes, while Billy and Jim hunted for fuel and arranged two sets of stones ready to make fires for the flapjack tournament. By some mysterious means the news spread through the valley, and soon one man after another came strolling by the camp as if they were just out for a pleasant walk in the dusk and had never heard of flapjacks in all their lives.

The Englishman greeted each new arrival with a cordial invitation to join the party, and soon a circle of homesick faces rimmed the camp-fire. Paw and Ben talked with the men and got from them all they knew about Hiram Miller, while Maw and Grandmaw stirred and poured, cooked and tossed, and cooked again. Jo and Jim fed the fire, Billy passed the cakes, and the men ate them

with such gusto that Grandmaw remarked aside to Maw that she "hadn't seen any critters enjoy their food like that, not since the army worms ate their way thro' Kentucky when she was a girl."

"Poor fellows," said Maw, "I reckon they're homesick."

"Wal," said Grandmaw, "mebbe so, but it ain't upset their appetites any." She sent

her twenty-sixth flapjack spinning into the air. "Looks to me like their boots must be full by this time. Ain't they got no bottom to their stummicks?" she asked.

"They sure do hold a lot," sighed Maw, "but they've got to stop now, the flour's given out!"

The news was broken to the circle by the Englishman and greeted by the men with groans, then a voice shouted, —

"Three cheers for the ladies!" They were given with a will.

"Three cheers for the flapjacks!" added another, and a roar went up from the campfire that sent the echoes flying down the valley.

Then belts were loosened, pipes were lit, and the miners gave themselves up to discussion of the possibility of finding Hiram Miller and restoring him to his family. It was late when the last man said good-night and the weary pioneers were free to seek their beds and get ready for an early start in the morning.

X

CALIFORNIA

X

CALIFORNIA!

ALL that Paw and Ben had been able to find out about Hiram Miller was that he had left the region on foot and alone to follow the American River down to the Sacramento. Perhaps there he might get passage to San Francisco on one of the small boats that plied up and down the stream bringing men and ever more men to the gold-fields.

"It's a good bit like tryin' to find a needle in a haymow," Paw said to Ben, as they put out the fire for the night and sprinkled water on the ashes, "but it's the only chance we've got, and we'll just have to take it and trust the good Lord your paw won't be out of sight behind a rock or something when we go by! He must have been plannin' to get back by boat around the Cape, or he wouldn't be goin' to San Francisco. I

reckon he wa'n't willin' to tackle the trail again. Besides, he might be able to get a job on a boat, and if he was broke he'd have to work his passage somehow. That's the way I figure it."

"I guess you're right, Paw," said Ben. "I'm goin' to follow him clear to San Francisco if I have to, and watch every boat that leaves the harbor till I find him, but you and Maw and Billy have no call to go along. You are where you want to be now, and it isn't right for us to take you any farther just because we've got to go."

Paw seemed hurt. "Look here, son," he said, "you sure don't think I'm that kind of a piker, do you? Not on your life I ain't! Whither thou goest I will go along too, just like Ruth said to her mother-in-law in Scripter. I've always figured that her mother-in-law must have been a right peart old lady like Grandmaw, or Ruth wouldn't have been partial enough to her to want to adopt all her kith and kin along with her. There's even some of Grandmaw's relations I'm free

to say I'd be willin' to do without. Howsomever, you kin be certain sure I'd never get a night's sleep again if I was to desert you and the kids now."

Ben turned his back on Paw and wiped his eyes furtively on his sleeve in the darkness, but all he said was, "All right, Paw; see you in the morning, then," as they separated to go to their tents.

At the crack of dawn next morning there were footsteps about the camp, and Grandmaw, peering from the shelter of the wagon, saw the Englishman lighting a pile of pinecones over the ashes of last night's fire.

"Look at that critter!" she whispered to Maw. "If he ain't makin' a fire and gettin' out his coffee-pot jest as handy as a woman!"

Maw peeped too. "Well, I never!" she exclaimed. "As sure as you live, I believe he's fixin' to get breakfast for us!"

"Huh?" said Grandmaw incredulously. She peeped again. "Wal, if that don't set me all of a flutter!" she exclaimed. "It sure

does 'em good to get along without women for a spell, don't it? Kind of makes 'em honor the weaker vessel more'n they done before!"

Maw, as was her habit, lost no time in philosophizing. In a few moments she had roused the camp and was helping their English friend cook the bacon, and by the time the first rays of the sun touched the tops of the trees, they had finished their breakfast and said good-bye to Mr. Tompkins, and the caravan was ready to move.

From cabins and tents along the way, as they passed down the valley, appeared the tousled heads of their friends of the night before, and many a rough voice roared good-byes and good wishes and gave them contradictory directions about the road. It was as if they were leaving friends of long standing instead of the acquaintances of a night.

All that day they followed the windings of the river, keeping a sharp lookout every step of the way, but no familiar figure

crossed their vision. Night fell, and when they could no longer see the trail, they camped beside a little waterfall and waited for the dawn before they again set forth upon their quest.

They asked questions of all the miners they passed on their way, but not one had seen any man answering the descriptions they gave, and they pressed on, growing heavier of heart at each fresh disappointment. Another day of fruitless search followed, and another heavy-hearted night was upon them as they reached the mouth of the American River and found a camping-spot on its shores that overlooked the wide stretches of the Sacramento. Ben and Paw were busy with the teams as Maw set about preparing supper.

"Billy, you pick up wood for the fire while Jo and Jim go down the hill, just like Jack and Jill, to fetch a pail of water," Maw commanded, "and don't be gone long, for I want to get supper out of the way before it's plumb dark."

Jim obediently took the pail, and the two children started down the steep incline with Ginger trotting around rocks and through the underbrush before them. They were nearing the bottom of the trail when they heard Ginger barking wildly at the river's edge below. Eager to see what caused the excitement, Jim dashed down the steep slope and suddenly found himself on a rock that overhung the river-bank with a sheer drop of several feet to the ground.

In a flash he saw Ginger barking frantically at a bearded man standing beside a raft at the water's edge below, but his momentum was such that he could not stop himself; the pail flew from his hand, and with a flying leap he landed almost in the arms of the most astonished man in California. Before either one could speak a second figure came crashing down and Jo landed beside her brother.

"Hello!" said the man, glancing up at the rock; "any more coming?"

Neither of the children answered. In-

stead, they stood just where they had landed from their leap and gazed at the bearded face of the stranger with a fixed stare, while

Ginger danced about him barking as if he had suddenly lost his senses.

"Well," said the man, after an instant's pause, "I'm not used to having folks drop in on me so sudden-like, out of nowhere. Where on earth did you boys come from?" At the sound of the well-remembered voice all the children's doubts vanished.

"Father!" shrieked Jo, and cast herself into his arms.

Jim was about to follow suit, but the man sat down suddenly on a rock and, holding them off at arm's length, looked at them in utter bewilderment; then he said, "You're crazy, plumb crazy, both of you, and old enough to know better. The young ones that belong to me are three thousand miles away, and one of 'em is a girl, besides. Sorry, but you're barking up the wrong tree!"

"Father! Father! don't you know us? It's Jo and Jim and Ginger!" shouted Jimmy, hugging his legs. "It's us, if we *have* got on Indian clothes!"

The man passed a hand over his brow. "Am I awake," he said, "or just dreaming again?" He gazed at them like one just roused from sleep, touched Jo's shorn head with a gentle finger, lifted Jim's chin and looked into the blue eyes so like his own, then clasped them both to his heart!

For a moment, just because there was so much to say, no one said anything at all. It was but for a moment, then the man sprang to his feet. "Mother, Ben," he cried; "where are they?" He was about to start impulsively up the trail, but the children pulled him down again to the rock.

"Ben's up at the camp, with Paw and Maw Sanders and Billy," said Jim.

"And Mother? Mother, too?" said the man.

"No, not Mother," sobbed Jo, "never—any more."

The man's face went suddenly pale as the truth broke upon him, and for a time the three wept in each other's arms.

Then suddenly Maw's voice came float-

ing down to them from the top of the ravine. "Jo! Jim!" she called, "where's that pail of water?"

"We're coming, Maw," Jim shouted back, and leaping to the raft floating at the river's edge, he filled the pail, then led the way up the trail, slopping water all the way.

"It's lucky you came just when you did," said their father, as he and Jo struggled up the slope together. "In another half-hour I should have been floating down the Sacramento on that raft!"

Near the top of the ravine they met Ben, coming down to get water for the cattle, but of that happy meeting, and the greetings of Maw and Paw, Grandmaw and Billy, when his three children proudly led him into the camp, there is more to tell than can be recorded here.

That night, when supper was over, they sat long about the glowing fire. Ben told his father about the farm, and Jo and Jim told him about Aunt Maria, and they all three at once told about their moving away,

about the red rag telegraph and finding the Sanders outfit, and the hardships of their terrible journey. Then their father told of his struggles to find gold, of the loneliness and disappointments that made him start back home by the long route of San Francisco and the Cape.

"I'd never go back over the trail again, not until there's a railroad through and a train to take me," he declared. "There's bound to be one some day."

"I'm not so sure about that," said Paw, "but it's all one to me whether there's ever a railroad or not. I'm here to stay. It looks like God's country to me, even if you do have to go through hell to get to it. I'm for startin' in to-morrow right where we be."

"I'm with you," said Hiram Miller. "It's a chancy thing hunting for gold, and I was plumb discouraged, but now my luck has turned and I'll start in again to-morrow, too. This place looks as promising as any for locating a claim."

"Well, there," said Maw practically, "if

we're all startin' in to make our fortunes in the morning, we'd better have a night's rest beforehand. Get to bed now, every last one of you."

"Maw's right, right as a trivet every time, Hiram," said Paw, "and you might as well know it first as last. You can't go wrong if you run by Maw's signals! She'll be a mother to the whole kit and b'ilin' of us, if you're minded to stick by, share and share alike."

"Pardners!" said Hiram Miller, "pardners all!" and the two men shook hands.

At last Grandmaw rose from her seat beside the fire and looked beyond the valley to the snow-capped peaks of the Sierras shining in the moonlight. "Wal," she said, "it looks to me like we've found the promised land at last and ketched up with everything we started out to ketch up with, all except the gold! And after what we went through in the wilderness to get here, pullin' down a mountain or two to find that don't look like so much of a chore to me!"